Testing! Testing! 1, 2, 3… Redefining who we leave behind: Standardized tests and high achieving students

A thesis presented by

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To the College of Professional Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

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November 30, 2015
Abstract
This study uses alignment theories and a general qualitative approach to explore and understand teacher descriptions of the effects state-wide standardized tests have had on their instruction and learning of high achieving students at one Connecticut school. Based in literature, two research questions guided this study: (1) How do teachers in a suburban intermediate school in Connecticut describe the effect that state-wide standardized tests have had on teaching and learning practices for students who are considered high achieving?; and (2) What are teacher perceptions regarding the level of rigor in the classroom for high achieving students as a result of the increased significance of standardized testing?

The findings of this study suggest teachers’ instruction and the learning of high achieving students is impacted by the culture of standardized testing. Findings of the study also suggest standardized testing drives instruction leading to narrowing of the curriculum, discrepancies exist between the amount of teacher time and resources afforded to high achieving students, students themselves are often standardized and seen as numbers/data points, and high achieving students experience a decrease in rigor due to the culture of testing. These findings provide insight for teachers and school leaders responsible for designing and implementing instruction. The findings of the study also add to research regarding standardized tests and high achieving students.

Key words: standardized tests, high achieving, classroom practices, student learning, accountability
Acknowledgements

Pursuing my doctorate has been a lifelong dream. In order to make this dream a reality, many individuals have provided a variety of supports along the way. Without them, this journey would have been more difficult.

I am grateful for the support of my professors at Northeastern University. Each and every course pushed me to challenge my assumptions, hone my skills, and make me a better scholar-practitioner. I am especially grateful to my advisor, Dr. Sara Ewell, and Dr. Chris Unger of Northeastern for their insight and guidance during the thesis writing process. I would also like to thank Dr. Melissa Hickey for lending her support not only as a third reader, but editor as well. These three provided the polish to what may have otherwise been a rusty piece of work.

I would also like to thank the district Superintendent for his approval of and support for this research. In addition, I would like to thank the numerous teacher participants who provided the data for this study. These individuals work countless hours to support and educate all students through the ever changing field of education. They make me proud to part of the education profession.

Finally, I could never have accomplished this work without the endless loving support of my amazing family. For my wonderful wife who supported me tirelessly, even when position papers, lit reviews, and coding carried on into the wee hours of the morning, and to my three wonderful, beautiful children who always make me proud, I offer my deepest thank you. You are my inspiration, my reason for being. To my 3 M’s… Your love and words of support mean more to me than anything in the world! Now maybe we can get to building that tree house!
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Chapter I: Introduction

One of the most significant issues facing education today is the gap between high and low-achieving students. Districts have attempted to use a number of methods to decrease this gap and increase student achievement, including smaller class sizes (Barrett & Toma, 2013), tutoring (Klausmeier, 1980), incentives (Levitt, List, Neckermann, & Sadoff, 2012), and Response to Intervention, also known as RtI (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2012).

It is posited that academically challenged students receive the bulk of the teacher’s time and educational resources in order to make them proficient on standardized tests, universal screens, and progress monitoring tests (Amrein-Beardsley, 2009). This practice has led to a narrowing of the curriculum (Berliner, 2011; Burris & Welner, 2011; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Horn, 2003), and a decrease in rigor in the classroom for children who are able to achieve benchmarks more easily and quickly (Azano, Missett, Callahan, Oh, Brunner, Foster, & Moon, 2011; Cross, 2007; Dimitriadis, 2012; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010).

This lack of rigor occurs for a variety of reasons, including misallocation of small group instruction time, preparation for standardized testing, and less resources being allocated for students who already perform well on tests.

Research Problem

This study seeks to understand and examine how teachers in a small, suburban, intermediate school in Connecticut describe the effect that state-wide standardized tests have on their teaching and learning practices with students who are considered high achieving by teachers. This problem has potential transferability to other districts subject to state-wide standardized tests.
The perceived effect of standardized tests on teaching and learning practices with high achieving students is of concern to parents, educators, and students themselves. In an effort to prepare as many students as possible to pass mandated standardized tests, much time is expended on filling in gaps of understanding and skill building through the use of targeted instruction and repetitive practice, ultimately leading to a watering down of rigor in the classroom (Au, 2011; Duncan & Stevens, 2011). If time is spent covering “the basics,” time for advanced learning is shortened. Time that is not spent on factual knowledge recall and skills, per se, but on test taking strategies such as skipping back to questions, going back to the text to find answers, and skimming for facts, only demonstrates students’ abilities to take tests, not think deeply (Kohn, 2000). With this preparation, schools may in fact lower academic rigor for those that are already able to perform well on tests. With such high-stakes, schools often focus limited resources on bringing lower achieving students into line in order to increase the numbers of students who are deemed proficient.

Standardized tests have become an integral part of American education and schooling. Standardized testing is experienced by nearly every school aged child in the United States today as a way of ensuring regulatory compliance (Connecticut Department of Education, 2012), measuring academic progress (Gunzenhauser, 2003), and evaluating teachers and school districts (Burris & Welner, 2011; Connecticut Department of Education, 2012). Although these outcomes can be used to improve curriculum and instruction, they can also convey negative connotations associated with their implementation.

As teachers spend more time and resources on and with students who are academically challenged, high achieving students have been left with less teacher time and fewer resources. Systematically teaching to the mean of students has resulted in vast numbers of students being
educated, but not to their full potential. Standardized testing has changed the focus of instruction in the classroom by encouraging teachers and schools to focus more effort on academically challenged students in order to make them proficient on standardized tests, universal screens, and progress monitor tests. This has resulted in high achieving students not receiving the instruction they deserve (Azano, et al., 2011; Cross, 2007; Dimitriadis, 2012; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010). By examining and understanding how teachers in a small, suburban, intermediate school in Connecticut describe the effect that state-wide standardized tests have on their teaching and learning practices with high achieving students, this educational community can benefit from a re-examination of how their classroom practices can be revised or refined to benefit students of all levels and abilities.

While there has been research on the impact of standardized test results (Anderman, Anderman, Yough, & Gimbert, 2010; Forte, 2010; Wiliam, 2010), there is much less on how teachers describe the effect that state-wide standardized tests have on their teaching and learning practices with high achieving students, a type of “gap” in the literature (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011).

This study seeks to fill this gap by examining teachers’ descriptions of how they have changed their instruction in the classroom due to standardized tests. Although this study is concerned with how high achieving students are affected, these issues may be significant to all classrooms affected by the use of standardized tests. The audiences for this study include schoolteachers, administrators, parents, advocates for high-achieving students, and practitioners and researchers alike. This study may be of particular interest to those teachers already ensconced in the delivery of instruction, and those who distill student data at the administrative level. In addition, by studying how teachers describe the effect standardized tests have on their
teaching and instruction, the practitioners in this particular setting may be able to reassess and reconsider appropriate teaching and learning practices that may benefit their high achieving students. Beyond this study at this particular school, other schools may be able to infer similar issues and challenges they face regarding standardized tests and instruction.

Significance of the Problem

Because of the amount of pressure teachers, schools, and districts feel to perform, many standardized tests have been deemed “high-stakes” (Berliner, 2011; Duncan & Stevens, 2011; Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Kohn, 2000). In Connecticut, additional emphasis on the use of standardized tests tied to teacher evaluations and tenure has added to this perception.

As classroom teachers spend more time preparing students for these tests, a perception of narrowing of the curriculum and lowered rigor in the classroom has occurred (Berliner, 2011; Burris & Welner, 2011; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Horn, 2003). This perception seems to place many at a disadvantage, especially high achieving students (Azano, et. al, 2011; Cross, 2007; Dimitriadis, 2012; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010).

It is theorized that cultivating high achieving students nurtures a “precious human-capital resource” (Kell, Lubinski, & Benbow, 2013, p. 648), aiding in preparing an intellectually robust population that contributes to “an economic impact” (Hurt & Witten, 2008, p.8). High achieving students therefore hold the potential to increase the welfare of society by “contributing creative products and competing in global economies” (Kell, Lubinski & Benbow, 2008, p. 658). Cultivating this potential is important as increasing numbers of students from countries other than the United States acquire skills that will allow them to analyze and interpret data (Wagner, 2010), providing competition for jobs and threatening America’s economic edge in a global economy (Wagner, 2010).
Although they are high achieving and have the capacity to do so, students who reach benchmarks more quickly and easily than others may not self-differentiate instruction, requiring the guidance and facilitation of teachers to challenge their abilities (Manning, Stanford, & Reeves, 2010). Without motivation, high achieving students may disengage from learning, thereby diverting the effort needed to reach their potential (Manning, Stanford, & Reeves, 2010). Left unchallenged, high achieving students run the risk of “academic mediocrity” (Manning, Stanford & Reeves, 2010, p. 146). This academic mediocrity directly threatens the “cognitive capitalism” (Rindermann & Thompson, 2011, p. 762) required for not only technological progress and development related to “economic growth and wealth, but also to sustaining a democratic and free society” (p. 762).

A part of American education culture. Standardized tests have become a hallmark of American Education. As Duncan and Stevens (2011) write, “By the beginning of the 21st century, the typical student in the United States took more than two dozen standardized tests by [high school] graduation” (Duncan & Stevens, 2011, p. 35). The number of states requiring standardized tests has risen as well. In 1972, only one state required state-level testing in order to measure student achievement. By 1985, that number had grown to 34 (Horn, 2003). In 2013, 46 states plus the U.S. Virgin Islands and Washington D.C. had adopted the Common Core State Standards (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Design, 2013) with their associated testing via assessments developed by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). As of 2015, three states, South Carolina, Indiana, and Oklahoma, have withdrawn adoption (Academic Benchmarks, 2015). With this growth, standardized tests have made an indelible mark on American education within the past century (Duncan & Stevens, 2011; Kohn, 2000), affecting
nearly every single teacher and student in public schools today. As such, testing has resulted in a dramatic pedagogical change that subsequently favors tested educational disciplines over other, non-tested subjects (Berliner, 2011).

**Test effects on academic subjects.** Although they have become a fundamental part of education, standardized tests are not universally embraced within the educational community (Berliner, 2011; Scot, Callahan, & Urquhart, 2008; Tye, Tye, & Tye, 2010). Standardized tests have resulted in a shift from child-centered education of the Progressives, to teacher centered education of the Essentialists, to that of “legislature centered” education (Kohn, 2000, p. 321). This legislative centered education model is especially prevalent today, considering a number of states have passed legislation tying standardized test results to teacher evaluations, resulting in greater teaching time devoted to test subjects, contributing to narrowing the curriculum in subjects such as science (Winters, Greene, & Trivitt, 2008), social studies (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010), and the arts (Heilig, Cole, & Aguilar, 2010).

**Positionality Statement**

In order to examine my problem as a scholar-practitioner, I need to be aware of biases and positionality as research is undertaken. Examinations of Briscoe (2005), Jupp and Slattery (2008), Fennell and Arnot (2008), and Carlton Parsons (2008), enable me to understand and articulate the concept that I have more biases and positions than I initially realized that might skew my study results.

**Personal school experiences.** I was considered a gifted student in school, having attended pull-out enrichment classes throughout my primary school career. I was part of the “Rookie of the Year” team of Future Problem Solvers for Connecticut in 7th grade. As a high school student, I coordinated the schools Model U.N. team, taking the place of an adult advisor
whose position was eliminated. It was through these activities I developed my opinions about what could be achieved by students in the regular classroom. The fact that I, as a student, had to create opportunities for other high achieving students because the school was unwilling or unable to help to solidify my opinions. These actions fed my belief that students, when given the opportunity to excel, will do so. It also perpetuated the perception that in many instances, high achieving students were being “left to fend for themselves” academically.

**Work experience.** The way I view standardized tests has been greatly shaped by my experiences in my district. The fact that I have been a third grade teacher in the same district for 14 years may affect my bias in a negative way. Although standardized test results can provide much information and opportunity for improving curriculum and instruction, their results have seldom resulted in examining what is “done right,” focusing more often on what is “done wrong.” Not having experiences in other districts creates a myopic view of interpreting standardized test results. Other districts may interpret results differently, placing differing levels of emphasis on test outcomes. Not knowing the level of interpretation of other districts creates a bias based only on the experiences I have had in my district.

**Positionality as a teacher.** Being a teacher, I must be aware of potential positionalities that may affect my research. As a teacher observing how standardized tests affect classrooms, I am a member of “the group.” I am then confronted with the potential to “perceive and represent the group in a way that constructs a social identity that protects and serves the interest of the group” (Briscoe, 2005, p. 28). I must then use careful consideration when presenting myself as a researcher, distancing my personal opinions from observable fact.

Being a teacher, I have a relationship with other teachers through a “kinship” of education. Proposed participants in my study are more than subjects, they are colleagues with
whom I have developed relationships with over time. These relationships can ultimately affect how I am perceived as a researcher, not only by teachers, but also by administrators. For much of the last decade and a half, I have been “one of the group” of teacher and viewed as a peer, and possibly as subordinate to administration. As I embark on collecting research, teachers may feel as if I am no longer part of their group, calculating reactions or responses because of the perception I no longer belong to their collective. The potential to be seen as subordinate to administration may affect how they interpret this research, in effect marginalizing their interpretations regarding my contributions to the field.

These considerations raise significant ethical issues. In order to conduct quality research, trust and respect must be established with participants. If this trust and respect cannot be established, validity of the study may be called into question. I must put aside my prior experiences with teachers and administration, and use new perspective to observe the participants of the study. Ultimately, if this trust and respect cannot occur, these negative biases on the part of the participants may be circumvented by the selection of a different venue, other than my own school.

I have been a third grade teacher in the same district for the past 14 years. Throughout this time, I have had numerous students of varied abilities and levels, from pre-primer readers, to reluctant learners, to children with varied Individual Education Plans, to gifted and talented students working three years above grade level, all in one classroom. I have developed methods and abilities to teach children of all types, whether they are academically challenged, or their challenges lie with behavioral issues. As of 2013, I had become the third most tenured out of 11 third grade teachers. Rising to this level of seniority has lent credibility, perspective, and most of all, leadership to my professional persona. This leadership has allowed me to sit on numerous
hiring committees, serve as grade level liaison, become the head pilot teacher for a new core-reading program, and serve as data team leader. It is in this capacity as data team leader that I have had the most experience with standardized tests.

**Experience with standardized tests as data team leader.** During my tenure over the past 14 years, I have witnessed an increase in the amount of standardized tests being administered to students. When I began teaching, most standardized testing occurred once a year as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002). Over the years, testing has evolved to include universal screens, progress monitors related to Response to Intervention, otherwise known as RtI (National Center for Response to Intervention, 2012), and end of year assessments. The results of summative, end-of-year tests are published in local newspapers, thereby increasing scrutiny of final scores. Although results from universal screens, progress monitors, and final tests have the ability to guide instruction, our school based data driven decision making process has turned from supportive and inspiring, to what some considered tedious and compulsory. It is part of the job of the data team leader to attend each teacher’s weekly meetings. In such a role, I have witnessed this turn from teacher’s anticipation of learning new strategies to use, to apprehension of finding their strategies have produced not an inadequate amount of data, but inadequate evidence of student achievement. This interpretation has created a bias toward the entire process, which I must overcome when completing my research. I must be vigilant in suppressing my biases, and presenting both the positive aspects of standardized tests, as well as potential pitfalls of test results.

Having taught for almost the last decade and a half, I have witnessed the transition from an emphasis on whole group instruction, the portfolio movement, and the advent of computers in the classroom; to renewed interest in and recognition of the achievement gap, an emphasis on
student assessment and data driven decision making; to Response to Intervention, teacher assessment and accountability; to Race to the Top, the Common Core State Standards, and increased emphasis on standardized tests. As I have taught over the years, I have been distressed at what I perceived as an erosion of rigor in the classroom for higher-achieving students. Budget cuts for gifted and talented teachers, the desire to lift school wide achievement levels instead of focusing on individual talents, and my perception that a pervasive attitude that “higher students will be able to fend for themselves” exists has piqued my interest in this area of research. Awareness of this, as a researcher, is of paramount importance in order to mitigate any effects of this bias on my study.

**Prior classroom experiences.** Not only as a teacher, but also as a person, I believe in the power of education to free individuals to pursue their interests, no matter what they may be. I firmly believe all children and adults can learn, and continue to do so throughout their lives. I also firmly believe in providing the skills and opportunities to all learners so they may flourish and experience learning at their optimal level. For learners who experience challenges, it is our job as teachers to provide guidance, scaffolding, and rigor so that they may grow and learn and meet their full potential. However, my prior experiences also lead me to believe students who are considered high achieving and can perform grade level tasks quickly and easily also need guidance, scaffolding, and rigor to meet their full potential.

This personal position must be controlled in a manner to account for and control (Machi & McEvoy, 2009) my bias on the subject of high achieving students. This bias must also be taken into consideration when seeking out the literature related to my area of research. Focusing merely on literature that reflects or enhances my position denigrates the research being performed, calling into question the findings of this proposed study. Therefore, I must carefully
research the many sides of the issue of standardized tests, clearly presenting each, and drawing conclusions based only on the data collected.

**Race and gender.** In the past 13 years, I had been one of two male teachers out of eleven in third grade. All students from town “feed into” our 3-5 intermediate school from one elementary school. There are no male classroom teachers K-2 in our district. Being one of the first male classroom teachers students interact with, I feel I have had a different relationship with them and their parents than my female colleagues. Class placements are not “blind” - second grade teachers know whose class they are placing their students into. Because of the perception that a male teacher can be a father figure to some, this often led me to receive a larger percentage of single parent children than other teachers. I am a white male in a predominately white, suburban, eastern Connecticut school. Our staff consists entirely of Caucasian staff members. In the realm of high-stakes standardized tests, at a particular disadvantage are non-whites, non-Asian, special needs, and English Language learners (Horn, 2003). I must take into careful consideration the effects of testing on these individuals in order to form a more balanced view of the effects of testing.

**Socioeconomic Status.** The families served by my district span the socio-economic spectrum. At the beginning of my teaching career, students would come from homes where many parents worked at relatively high paying jobs in the insurance or pharmaceutical industries. I personally identified with these parents as professionals. In recent years, more children seem to come from families where parents are self-employed, work lower paying, sometimes minimum-wage jobs, or are “un” or “under” employed. Currently, we have a large number of free and reduced lunch children. Again herein lies a basis for positionality. I consider myself privileged in the fact that I own my own home, have a family, and am a teacher. I must be wary of biased
“othering” interpretations (Briscoe, 2005). Students who are high achieving do not only come from families where parents have high paying jobs and enjoy an upper-middle class lifestyle. I must be wary, and include not only participants who belong to the same gender, race, and upbringing as me, but also those that are not of my gender, race, and/or socioeconomic status.

**Parent of school-aged children.** I grew up in the town next to where I teach. I am not only a teacher, but also a parent to three school-aged children. Another personal bias I must encounter is the fact that having worked with children all along “the continuum,” I feel my own children could be categorized as high achieving. I am sure this positionality is not unlike most parents’ towards their own children. However, because of my career as a teacher, I feel entitled to this opinion. Again, I must be aware of this type of “othering” of students (Briscoe, 2005), and not advocate simply for students I feel are similar to my children. The idea that my own children are high-achieving, and the feeling they are not receiving enough rigor due to the effects of standardized testing must be acknowledged, and tempered. I must not have preconceptions about what my research may uncover or reveal regarding standardized tests and high-achieving students in the classroom.

**Summary.** Personal biases and experiences have the potential to skew my research path. Awareness of these biases will allow research to progress in an uninhibited manner, free from processes influenced by personal positionality. All the biases outlined above have the potential to affect how my research is completed, and how results are interpreted. One must have an open mind when embarking on research, uncovering unknowns whether they support biases or not. Stating my personal biases here is an attempt to allow the reader a tool to interpret my findings with clarity and perspective.
Conceptual Framework

Abelmann and Elmore's (2004) conceptual Framework of Alignment guided this study. Originally used to measure how much teachers in various school systems “think about accountability in their daily work” (Abelmann & Elmore, 2004, p. 2), Abelmann and Elmore developed their Framework of Alignment (2004) in conjunction with a study of 20 schools in the United States. Data from these 20 schools contributed to the establishment of a working theory whereby schools display “an array of accountability formulations” (p. 42). Using this theory, Abelmann and Elmore (2004) found these schools’ collective expectations and personal responsibilities were influenced to varying degrees by external and internal accountability. Using this model, this study explores how teacher accountability to standardized test scores affects instruction and learning of high achieving students with regard to personal responsibility and collective expectations.

Abelmann and Elmore (2004) describe three major components and constructs that frame this study to an educational system: Individual Responsibility, Collective Expectations, and Accountability. Interpreting this model, individual teacher responsibility towards student success, along with the collective expectations of the school district and society, are joined together with accountability through assessment. In and of themselves, each of these components forms a strong basis for instruction in the classroom. However, when intertwined together, these three tenets lead to an amalgamated overlap known as Internal Alignment of Responsibility, Expectations, and Accountability. Although they are intertwined, accountability drives the rest of the framework in that it directly influences both expectations and responsibility in the classroom. Using this model, accountability is satisfied, in part, by the use of state-wide, standardized tests.
Components of teacher professional activities, classroom level environment, and teacher classroom practice relate to the Individual Responsibility pillar of the Framework of Alignment (Abelmann & Elmore, 2004). These components, in turn, relate to Internal Alignment of Responsibility, Expectations, and Accountability required of teachers. Classroom level environment, teachers’ professional activities, and school level environment relate to the Framework of Alignment’s tenet of Collective Expectations. According to the Framework of Alignment, these expectations of the collective therefore influence the internal alignment of the teacher, affecting their beliefs about how standardized testing influences instruction and learning. Finally, teacher classroom practice and classroom level environment correlate closely to the Accountability pillar of the Framework of Alignment (Abelmann & Elmore, 2004) due to school, district, state, and federal requirements.

As a foundational belief of this Framework, these factors contribute to the related beliefs and attitudes of teachers in the classroom. These factors directly influence beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning from the direct transmission of information, to the use of higher order, Constructivist beliefs. These beliefs will be explored through the use of the following research questions.
Research Questions

Research associated with qualitative studies utilizes one central question, supplemented by sub questions that narrow the focus of the study (Creswell, 2003). In this study, the central question regards teachers’ descriptions of the effects of standardized tests on high achieving students. In addition to the central question, sub questions are asked to provide guideposts (Creswell, 2003) to provide a pathway for the researcher. One such question, how do teachers view the overall increase or decrease of rigor in the classroom for students that are considered high achieving, directly relates to instructional practices. Literature (Au, 2011; Duncan & Stevens, 2011) indicate targeted instruction and repetitive practice used in an effort to pass standardized tests leads to a decrease in rigor in the classroom. In order to provide a balanced perspective to this line of reasoning, it is important to gather information regarding the perspectives of teachers as to the status of rigor. Students learn more when instruction and practice is coupled with higher order thinking strategies generally associated with increased rigor (Tomlinson, 2005; VanTassel-Baska, 2010). Put into colloquial terms, does changing instructional methods due to standardized tests “help or hurt” students in the classroom, especially those that are considered high achieving?

The research questions then are as follows:

Research Questions

1. How do teachers in a suburban intermediate school in Connecticut describe the effect that state-wide standardized tests have had on teaching and learning practices for students who are considered high achieving?

2. What are teacher perceptions regarding the level of rigor in the classroom for high achieving students as a result of the increased significance of standardized testing?
Chapter II: Review of the Literature

As some in the educational community contend, American teachers have become “deskilled” (Tye, Tye, & Tye, 2010, p. 34) in the endless quest for “proficient” on standardized tests. This in part results from the “large scale influx of prepackaged material” (Apple, 1982, p. 167) designed to standardize instruction in classrooms and take curricular decision making out of the hands of teachers. In this pursuit of “proficient,” excellence has been marginalized. Teachers are being denied the ability to use their skills and expertise to educate students and assist them in becoming independent learners, all in the pursuit of holding teachers accountable for student achievement on state regulated assessments (Tye, Tye, & Tye, 2010).

This study seeks to understand and examine how teachers in a small, suburban, intermediate school in Connecticut describe the effect that state-wide standardized tests have had on their teaching and learning practices with high achieving students. This particular school and schools in other districts may be able to gain insight into this challenge from this study.

Organization of the Review

This study will focus on the issue of standardized tests and descriptions of their effects on classroom instruction and learning practices regarding high-achieving students. This literature review will define and provide context for the terms “standardized test,” and “high achieving students.” A brief history of standardized tests in the 20th Century and their evolution into “high-stakes” tests follows. An explanation of tested subjects, and further explanation regarding determining who is considered a high achieving student. The effect of standardized tests on instruction and learning, and the resultant narrowing of the curriculum and loss of rigor in the classroom will be explored. Connections between standardized tests and teacher evaluation will be discussed, as well as disadvantaged groups and testing, the role of the teacher, curriculum, and motivation related to standardized tests. The way in which fidelity of implementation is
perceived will then be presented. Finally, the importance of higher order thinking and assessment considerations for high achieving students will be discussed.

**Definition of Standardized Tests**

In order to establish understanding of what is considered a standardized test for the purposes of this literature review, the following definition should be considered:

A standardized test is any form of test that (1) requires all test takers to answer the same questions, or a selection of questions from common bank of questions, in the same way, and that (2) is scored in a “standard” or consistent manner, which makes it possible to compare the relative performance of individual students or groups of students. While different types of tests and assessments may be “standardized” in this way, the term is primarily associated with large-scale tests administered to sizeable populations of students, such as a multiple-choice test given to all the eighth-grade public-school students in a particular state, for example (Great Schools Partnership, 2013).

**Definition of High Achieving Students**

For the purposes of this literature review, students who are considered high achieving are those identified as scoring level “4,” or “advanced” on state-wide standardized tests administered in Connecticut, including the Smarter Balanced test.

**20th Century History of Standardized Tests**

Standardized testing in education traces its roots back to William Bagley and Essentialism (Imig & Imig, 2006). Considered to be the father of Essentialism (Imig & Imig), Bagley put firm belief in teacher-centered education and the teaching of “the basics” to measurable ends (Imig & Imig).
With the rise of the Soviet Union in the 1950s, Cold War rhetoric increased, ushering in a nationalistic spirit based upon the survival of American society and the defeat of communism. Critics of education went as far as stating, “…the poor quality of the public schools constituted a major threat to national survival” (Herschbach, 1997, p. 21). Education had to be reformed if America was to keep its competitive edge in the world. In order to do that, all students, regardless of race, creed, gender, religion, or socioeconomic status (SES) had to have access to education and opportunities for success. The United States Congress had to develop a plan in order to “level the playing field” in relation to poverty and education. Frustration with the practices of the late 1950s/early 1960s led to further action. This action would culminate with Lyndon Johnson’s 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Duncan & Stevens, 2011).

According to Duncan and Stevens (2011), Sacks (1999) contends the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act had an “unquantifiable impact on the expansion of standardized testing in American schools” (Duncan & Stevens, 2011, p. 36) due to the introduction of Title I. Title I allowed financially strapped communities with large populations of poor children the opportunity to receive federal aid to counteract poverty. In order to receive these monies, however, norm-referenced tests were required in order to measure the efficacy of impact on poor children (Duncan & Stevens, 2011). These norm-reference tests developed into standardized tests in order to ensure all students, regardless of SES, were performing in school and showing appropriate achievement.

In the 1980s, the Reagan administration, with the clear, defined purpose of “restoring conservative influence and reforming education” (Herschbach, 1997, p, 20), sought to turn American education around. States strengthened math, science, and language requirements. However, as Null (2007) contends, “standards and accountability grew out of the economically
driven *A Nation at Risk* report of 1983” (p. 1013). From this call for standards and accountability eventually came the era of standardized tests.

Limited success with Title I prompted 1983’s politically driven “A Nation at Risk” (Duncan & Stevens, 2011; Null, 2007). As the Reagan administration embarked on “restoring conservative influence” and “reforming education” (Herschbach, 1997, p. 20) in the 1980s, federal aid to education was cut, Business became involved in education in order to satisfy their own outcomes, and advocacy groups called for lower taxes, school choice, curriculum change, and standardized testing (Herschbach, 1997).

The Clinton administration furthered enabled standardized tests to take hold. In 1993, *Goals 2000*, which revised the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, “pushed for even greater emphasis on state mandated curricula and standardized tests” (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010, p. 117). This law, and the preceding ones, built up to the largest standardized testing required legislation to its inception: “An act to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind”, better known as NCLB (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2001). This has led some to call high-stakes testing and the standardization of curriculum, tested by prepackaged curriculum, to be the new “Taylorism of education,” aptly named after Frederick Winslow Taylor, “the father of scientific management” (Burke, 2011, p. 30). Due to heavy reliance on data gathering, which determines future actions (Au, 2011, p. 25).

**Moving from Standardized to “High-stakes” Tests**

High stakes testing refers to “…the use of standardized testing measures as criteria for determining the quality of schools, promotion of children to the next grade, high school graduation, teacher bonuses, or the governance of a school” (Gunzenhauser, 2003, p. 53). With the passage of NCLB, states were now required to administer annual standardized tests in order
to demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) or risk sanctions (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2001) ranging from having teachers and administrators fired, being “reconstituted, or [schools] closed” (Berliner, 2011, p. 287).

Because of the pressures associated with assuring positive results on these assessments, they have become known colloquially as high stakes tests (Berliner, 2011; Duncan & Stevens, 2011; Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Kohn, 2000). As Duncan and Stevens (2011) point out, prior to the advent of “high stakes” testing, “…except for the graduate school examinations, such as the GRE, LAST, GMAT, or MCAT, the various test results did not lead to dramatic consequences” (Duncan & Stevens, 2011, p. 36). With high stakes, not only the threat of stigmatization, but also the loss of federal aid dollars led school administrators to pressure teachers to perform. With such pressure, teachers spend an inordinate amount of time doing universal screens, progress monitoring, and preparing for annual cumulative standardized tests, often to the detriment of content area subjects such as science (Winters, Greene, & Trivitt, 2010) and social studies (McGuire, 2007). As a result of potential ramifications of not passing these tests, the educational practice of countless school districts, teachers, and students have been affected. Because of this, standardized testing has led to a narrowing of the curriculum, and lower rigor in the classroom (Berliner, 2011; Burris & Welner, 2011; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Horn, 2003). Ironically, the testing that was established to measure students’ achievement may have ultimately led to diminished gains in application and understanding.

Advent of Response to Intervention (RtI)

Although many of the testing instruments have changed, some foundations of support, such as tiered instruction associated with Response to Intervention (RtI) have remained. RtI provides a structure to enable schools to implement scientific, research based instruction in a
way that seeks to ensure positive academic outcomes. RtI uses data driven decision-making and creates a Multi-level Prevention System (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2012) that includes three levels of intensity or prevention.

The primary prevention level (Tier 1) includes high quality core instruction. The secondary level (Tier 2) includes evidence-based intervention(s) of moderate intensity. The third level (Tier 3) includes individualized intervention(s) of increased intensity for students who show minimal response to secondary prevention (para. 1).

Using universal screens and progress monitoring of all students benefits the classroom as a whole, including those that may benefit from enrichment (Azano, et al., 2011; Basham, Graden, Israel, Poth, & Winston, 2010; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010). Although initially introduced as a means to address deficiencies in academics, RtI and its tiered system is beneficial for and can be used to enhance classroom enrichment (VanTassel-Baska, 2010; Azano, et al, 2011; Basham, et al, 2010). Not only for high achieving students, but for those who may potentially be considered talented and gifted as well, early intervention through the use of RtI focuses on supporting potential in the area of the student’s strength. Many schools do not begin formal identification of giftedness until the end of second or beginning of third grade, thereby making students with high potential have little or no support (Coleman & Hughes, 2009). Lacking formal identification, students who would otherwise be considered gifted and talented, or at the very least high achieving, may flounder without proper support during the first critical years of schooling. Universal screening and progress monitoring could prove invaluable in identifying high achieving Tier 1 students. Small group instruction (SGI) time devoted to these students with the use of appropriately enhanced curricular resources may lead to better understandings and higher achievement. However, even one of the most popular programs used
to determine Tiers proclaims one of its purposes is to indicate which students are, and are not, “…on a pathway to proficiency on state tests” (Highest Ratings, n.d., para. 3).

**Tested Subjects**

Under NCLB, reading and mathematics are the two subjects that gauge the academic progress of US students in grades 3-8 (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008). Among the positive outcomes of NCLB was the introduction of RtI and its ability to provide information as to which students needed more focused, intensive instruction. In order to bridge the gap between low and high achieving students, RtI uses data-driven decision-making and creates a system with tiers to identify students achievement levels (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2012). RtI utilizes these leveled tiers of identification to identify students in need of small group instruction in order to pursue positive academic outcomes. All students in a classroom are considered Tier 1, but they may also be included in Tier 2 or Tier 3 depending on the intensity of interventions required.

**Who is Considered High Achieving?**

Students who are considered high achieving are considered Tier 1 individuals who are identified as scoring advanced or its equivalent on normed standardized tests. This criteria includes, but is not limited to, students considered gifted and talented. Jellinek, Henderson, and Pfeiffer (2009) offer the following to further describe who is considered gifted and talented:

- Characteristics commonly associated with giftedness include advanced language and reasoning skills; conversation and interests more aligned with older children and adults;
- impressive long-term memory; intuitive understanding of concepts; insatiable curiosity;
- advanced ability to connect disparate ideas, and appreciate relationships; rapid learning;
- heightened sensitivity and intensity of feelings and emotions; perfectionism; moral
sensitivity; and asynchrony across developmental domains. (Jellinek, Henderson, & Pfeiffer, 2009, p. 787.)

The authors note, however, that no gifted child exhibits all the above criteria, and criteria are observed to different degrees (Jellinek, Henderson, & Pfeiffer, 2009).

In order to further answer the question of who is considered high achieving or exceedingly above average, Pfeiffer (2012) describes “fictions” related to the idea of giftedness. Among these fictions is the notion that being gifted means a high IQ. Contemporary thinking challenges the notion that IQ alone can predict giftedness (Pfeiffer, 2012). Most gifted and talented programs use minimum scores to determine eligibility. By nature of being a cut-off point, minimum scores are just that, a minimum. If a program uses a minimum IQ score of 130 but a student’s score is 129, they would not be eligible. As Pfeiffer points out, “contemporary thinking challenges provincial, and many would argue, outmoded approach(es) to gifted identification,” (Pfeiffer, 2012, p. 3). The academic achievement between someone who scores 129 as opposed to 130 would be negligible. However, under this scenario, the student scoring outside the acceptable range would be denied extra support in the form of gifted and talented services, therefore relying solely on instruction in the regular classroom. This scenario illustrates the importance of regular classroom structuring and instruction to assist students in their pursuit of learning.

Another misconception Pfeiffer (2012) addresses is the notion that “once gifted, always gifted.” This belief is the reason why students that are classified as gifted in lower grades because of high IQ are not required to be reclassified later in higher grades (Pfeiffer, 2012).

What is even more troubling is, as Pfeiffer quotes Lohman and Korb (2006), “…there is little reason to screen for ‘missed’ students who are not identified in the earlier grades as gifted since
you are either gifted or not gifted at birth.” (Pfeiffer, 2012, p. 4). In this scenario, the student who qualifies for gifted and talented may be included in a pull out program (if one is even available), but the equally gifted or high achieving student who begins to show potential in later grades would be left out. This mindset does not take into account the “late bloomer” who may not exhibit the required criteria at a young age, but may do so in the late elementary/early middle school years, or beyond (Pfeiffer, 2012). This type of mindset excludes a great number of students from being exposed to enrichment resources – resources that may otherwise allow them to make appropriate academic progress.

Although a component of K-12 school systems, RtI has found its way into early childhood education as well. Not to be confused with formal psychological tests required to determine IQ, the benefits of identifying strengths and weaknesses in early childhood programs allows programs to be implemented to benefit the student to a greater degree, at an earlier age (Greenwood, Bradfield, Carta, Kaminski, Linas, & Nylander, 2011).

Although they have become a fundamental part of education, standardized tests are not universally embraced within the educational community (Tye, Tye, & Tye, 2010; Berliner, 2011; Scot, Callahan, & Urquhart, 2008). Literature (Scot, Callahan, & Urquhart, 2009; Horn, 2003; Baker & Johnson, 2010; Gunzenhauser, 2003) supports the case against standardized testing for a number of reasons. Among the criticisms of standardized tests are that they narrow the curriculum (Berliner, 2011) and reduce the amount of rigor in the classroom, especially for children who are able to achieve benchmarks more easily and quickly (Dimitriadis, 2012; Cross, 2007; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010; Azano, et al., 2011). Using this information, then, one may assume standardized testing in the form of high-stakes testing is detrimental to the use of higher level thinking processes in American classrooms.
Effects of Reduction of Rigor on Instruction and Learning

Being high-stakes, standardized tests tend not to lend themselves to “low-stakes” formative learning (Dorn, 2010). In an effort to prepare as many students as possible to pass mandated standardized tests, much time is expended on filling in gaps of understanding through the use of targeted instruction and repetitive practice, ultimately leading to a watering down of rigor in the classroom (Au, 2011; Duncan & Stevens, 2011). If time is spent covering “the basics,” time for advanced learning is shortened. This is not beneficial, nor does it challenge students to develop themselves in a manner that fulfills their potential. Time that is spent on test taking strategies such as skipping back to questions, going back to the text to find answers, and skimming for facts, only demonstrates students’ abilities to take tests, not think deeply (Kohn, 2000). With this preparation, schools may in fact lower academic rigor for those that are already able to perform well on tests. With such high-stakes, schools often focus limited resources on bringing lower achieving students into line in order to increase the numbers of students who are deemed proficient.

It has been theorized that pressure to focus on literacy and mathematics has led many districts to focus less time on subjects such as science (Winters, Greene, & Trivitt, 2008), and social studies (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010). Fitchett and Heafner (2010) continue to proffer that with an educational policy shift toward national standardization (p. 114), more subjects will be marginalized in the pursuit of proficiency in tested areas. Such nationalized standardization is currently being recognized with states’ adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). As of 2013, 46 states plus the U.S. Virgin Islands and Washington D.C. had adopted the Common Core State Standards (Core Standards, 2012), only to see three states decline adoption after the fact (Academic Benchmarks, 2015). Two competing constituencies split up the states:
the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) has been adopted by 11 states and the District of Columbia (Partnership for Assessment, 2015), while the remainder of CCSS states have adopted the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). Questions remain as to how the overall cumulative effect of Smarter Balanced and PARCC tests may influence perceptions of classroom instruction, such as may have occurred with No Child Left Behind. However, Connecticut’s recently adopted System for Educator Evaluation and Development (SEED) plan stresses the importance of standardized test results. As such, pressure to get students to perform on standardized tests in relation to the Teacher Evaluation Plan will in effect make them high-stakes.

**Standardized Tests Connected to Teacher Evaluation Plans**

A large component of evaluation, School Performance Index (SPI) ratings have affected every teacher in every classroom in Connecticut schools. Prior to the 2014-2015 school year using criteria established by the State of Connecticut (2013), credit was given for moving individual students across a performance threshold. A value of .33 was assigned to each student crossing over a performance threshold. In this form, students who cross from “below basic” to “basic” are awarded .33 points each. Similarly, students moving from “basic” to “proficient”, and “proficient” to “goal” each receive .33 points calculated toward the overall SPI rating. Using this same notion, if a student moves from “below basic” to “proficient”, a gain of two full performance thresholds, the student receives .66 points (CT State Department of Education, 2013). However, using this system of School Performance Index ratings, students who are at “advanced” or move from “goal” to “advanced” receive no SPI points whatsoever (CT State Department of Education, 2013). Thus, teachers are provided an incentive to focus only on students performing on the low end of the index, and are provided a disincentive (in the form of
time and energy required to teach) to advance students who achieve “goal” or “advanced,” a definite reduction in classroom rigor.

As Connecticut “transitions from state legacy tests to the Smarter Balanced Assessment” (CT State Department of Education, 2014), SPI ratings were not available during the 2014-2015 school year (CT State Department of Education, 2015). Instead, Connecticut’s teacher evaluation plan may use assessments tied to the Common Core State Standards to form up to 22.5% of a teacher’s annual evaluation (CT State Department of Education, 2014). Since consequences of teachers not meeting learning objectives includes loss of tenure, reduction of salary, or dismissal (CT State Department of Education, 2012), there is enormous pressure to perform on standardized assessments.

This tends to be the view sanctioned by outgoing Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. In correspondence (Burris & Welner, 2011) between Secretary Duncan and South Side High School Principal Carol Corbett Burris, Secretary Duncan still believes, “…student test scores are an important evaluative component” of teacher evaluation (Burris & Welner, 2011, p. 41). With this sort of endorsement from the United State Secretary of Education, there is little chance of mitigating the inclination to rely heavily on standardized tests for evaluative purposes. The question remains, how will teachers describe the effect that state-wide standardized tests have on their teaching and learning practices with high achieving students?

**Narrowing of the Curriculum**

A major concern of standardized tests is that they provide schools with an incentive to focus only on subjects which require accountability, and marginalize the rest (Winters, Greene, & Trivitt, 2010). “The vast majority of these policies base their rewards or sanctions exclusively on the results of reading and math tests” (Winters, Greene, & Trivitt, 2010, p. 138). However,
just because science, social studies, and the arts are not tested items, their importance to the overall development of an individual should not be overlooked.

With receding budgets and limited resources, many districts may seek to “cut the fat” in programs that are already trim, in order to increase instructional time in the tested areas of math and reading. These subjects cannot bear the cuts without negatively affecting student learning and morale (Heilig, Cole, & Aguilar, 2010). One of the areas often cut are the arts (Heilig, Cole, & Aguilar, 2010), yet arts education builds not only academic skills, but contributes to enrichment and well-rounded learners.

Students learn more when instruction and practice is coupled with higher order thinking strategies (Tomlinson, 2005; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010). Based on Bloom’s (1956) Taxonomy, higher order thinking encompasses the last three of six levels of cognitive behavior: analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Not only is higher order thinking an important part of specific learning goals, it is important for general classroom instruction as well (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008; Tomlinson, 2005; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010). Students benefit from high level, concept-based, meaning focused curriculum and instruction, such as “school wide enrichment and learning” (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008, p. 502). Contrary to the narrowing of curriculum that occurs in response to testing, extending tasks and utilizing higher order thinking skills challenges knowledge and allows students to apply their learning to new contexts. Extending the curriculum in this manner through the use of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, all students in a classroom are challenged with rigorous and engaging learning that may otherwise be unchallenging and underwhelming (Siegle & McCoach, 2005).

Findings from a study done in 1995 by Reis, Hébert, Diaz, Maxfield, and Ratley, indicated a lack of challenge contributed to the underachievement of gifted students (Reis &
Morales-Taylor, 2010). Many gifted students become underachievers because they have been in under-challenging classrooms, and face ridicule and isolation because they are perceived to be so smart they do not seem to fit in. This ridicule and isolation forces many to acquiesce to peer pressure in the form of minimal effort (Reis & Morales-Taylor, 2010). Gifted students may feel out of place, encouraging them to dismiss their giftedness in order to fit in with the rest of the class. Additionally, instead of emphasizing their ability to master the curriculum, teachers may be somewhat intimidated by high achievers resulting in students dismissing their talents because of lack of support from the school environment (Siegle & McCoach, 2005).

Groups at a Disadvantage

When it comes to high stakes testing, at a particular disadvantage are non-whites, non-Asian, special needs, and English Language learners (Horn, 2003). Testing bias has worked against such individuals in the past, inaccurately determining their academic prowess. Those with declined socio-economic status (SES) are at a similar disadvantage. Much to the chagrin of teachers who know the detriments of such conditions, “other variables affect low SES students’ learning and education, including home life, which not been taken into account on a high-stakes test” (Baker & Johnson, 2010. p. 198).

A Change in Philosophy

Gunzenhauser (2003) cites Crotty (1998) emphasizing testing springs forth from a “behaviorist, positivist philosophy on what can be measured quantitatively” (Gunzenhauser, 2003, p. 53). With this lens, a vision of education has in fact developed that “values highly what can be measured, and more problematically, values most highly the measurement itself” (Gunzenhauser, 2003, p. 54).
However, according to Baker and Johnson (2010), analysis of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), increased high-stakes test scores do not equate to increased learning (Baker & Johnson, 2010). Results from tests provide much information to districts, such as ability to retrieve knowledge, but do not give all the information necessary to make critical, systemic decisions (Horn, 2003). This knowledge retrieval falls far short of the higher level thinking skills employed at the terminus of Bloom’s scale, skills critical for expanding students’ knowledge in classrooms today.

Instead, students’ focus on “mastering only those competencies measured on the exam” (Horn, 2003, p. 32) is detrimental to the educational well-being of all students. If the basis of education is to educate the whole person, just as Pestalozzi or Froebel promoted in the late 18th century (Reese, 2001), the culture of high-stakes testing has essentially disposed of child-centered learning and placed an inordinate amount of pressure on teachers to live in two worlds: that of child-centered activity, and that of teacher-centered assessment and accountability.

**The Role of the Teacher, Curriculum, and Motivation**

One of the most important factors that influences achievement is the role of the teacher (Tomlinson, Gould, Schroth, & Jarvis, 2006). Quality teachers can make the difference between inspiring a motivated student making academic progress, and an under motivated child floundering in school. Teachers have moved from lecturing and professing knowledge, to managing how students learn in learning environments (Williams & Williams, 2011). Although initially researched as part of higher education, Williams and Williams (2011) ideas are applicable to elementary education as well. Teacher expertise and experience leads to successful classroom practices. Important is the use of classroom practices that enhance students’ experiences and lend themselves to inquisitive learning (Cross, 2007; Dimitriadis, 2012; Hong,
Greene, & Hartzell, 2011; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010). Establishing learning goals as opposed to performance goals allows students to show success through learning something new, monitoring their own progress, and choosing challenging tasks (Hong, Greene, & Hartzell, 2011). Standardized testing instead lends itself to use drill and practice techniques of teaching (Moon, Brighton, & Callahan, 2003). This type of instruction also often results in high achieving students feeling pressure to increase overall average scores, leading to disengagement from instruction (Moon, Brighton, & Callahan, 2003).

Motivation plays an important part in student success (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008; Hong, et al., 2011; Siegle & McCoach, 2005). Motivated students feel good about their schools and what they do. Doing what they enjoy makes them connect their activities to beneficial outcomes, and they believe they have the skills they need to be successful (Siegle & McCoach, 2005). Williams and Williams (2011) identify five components of motivation in the classroom: student, teacher, content, method/process, and environment (Williams & Williams, 2011, p. 2). Each one of these components is interrelated to the others. The shortfall of one may result in the detriment of the other four. The result however is key. It is the motivation of the student to succeed that increases achievement. If high achieving students are left to fend for themselves because of time and resources being devoted solely to students in need of remediation, there is liable to be disengagement from the curriculum and learning (Moon, Brighton, & Callahan, 2002).

**Standardized Tests Effect on Fidelity of Implementation**

Fidelity of implementation (FOI) is a component of instruction that must be considered. FOI varies among different classrooms, based upon the following generalizations proposed by Azano, et. al, (2011):
• The more professional autonomy a teacher experiences, the higher the teacher’s adherence and quality of delivery tend to be;

• The higher a teacher’s perception of available instructional time, the higher the teacher’s adherence and quality of delivery tend to be;

• The higher a teacher’s expectation for student performance or the higher the teacher’s belief about her students’ abilities, the higher the teacher’s adherence and quality of delivery tends to be;

• The higher a teacher’s belief about their own professional expertise, the higher the teacher’s adherence and quality of delivery tend to be (p. 706).

Ballet, Kelchtermans, and Loughran (2006) contend mandated curricula affect teacher autonomy, thereby influencing what is taught, and how. With decreased autonomy, instruction and quality of delivery tend to decrease in efficacy (Azano, et. al, 2011). Similarly, prescribed curricula do not necessarily equate to high quality instruction (Justice, Mashburn, Hamre, & Pianta, 2008). Student performance is enhanced when teachers’ expectations are high (Rubie-Davies, 2010). This finding correlates to Azano, et. al (2010), which similarly emphasizes correlation between teacher expectations and academic performance. If teachers are focusing instruction primarily on passing state mandated, standardized tests, expectations for student performance in subject areas other than those tested are subject to diminished expectations.

One of the largest factors affecting student achievement is having a good, quality teacher in the classroom (Tomlinson, Gould, Schroth, & Jarvis, 2006). Crocco and Costigan (2007) hold that teachers choose to stay or leave districts and the profession based on their degree of satisfaction and how they connect with their students (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). Perception of satisfaction is determined, in part, by how teachers feel they have an active part in what is taught,
and the process which is used. This process is directly associated with teachers feelings of autonomy and satisfaction. With narrowing of the curriculum, increased time is devoted to the study of reading and math, while other subjects experience a decreased amount of classroom time. In order to “de-narrow” the curriculum and expand it beyond the realm of high-stakes testing, teachers must find ways to increase rigor and expand higher order thinking strategies.

As an alternate to Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy Paige, Sizemore, and Neace (2013) utilized Webb’s (1997, 1999) Depth of Knowledge (DOK) scale to determine “if increasing cognitive rigor can result in greater student engagement” (Paige, Sizemore, & Neace, 2013, p. 11). Findings indicated a fifth of students were not engaged in classroom instruction on average, and as lessons progress from beginning to middle to end, a full quarter of students were disengaged from instruction (p. 11). Results from the study indicate “increasing the level of thinking demanded of students increases the percentage of students who are engaged with instruction” (p.11) and “as DOK level increases, a much larger percentage of students remain engaged with instruction across the entire class period” (p. 11). This study clearly illustrates the importance of motivation within the classroom setting as a determinant for academic success.

**Importance of Higher Order Thinking in the Classroom**

Students throughout the academic ability spectrum learn more when coupled with higher order thinking (HOT) strategies (Tomlinson, 2005; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010). The repetitive, drill and practice techniques sometimes associated with standardized tests (Moon, Brighton, & Callahan, 2003) do not lend themselves to higher order thinking strategies. Higher order thinking is an important part of tiered instruction, or general instruction for that matter (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008; Tomlinson, 2005; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010). Students benefit from high level, concept-based, meaning focused curriculum and instruction (Beecher &
In order to challenge motivated learners, the curriculum should be extended with the goal of expertise in a particular discipline (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008). Doing so will engage the learner who may otherwise be underwhelmed (Siegle & McCoach, 2005). For lack of a better term, “underwhelmmment” may in turn lead to unintended, detrimental consequences affecting academic achievement for the entire class. Left unchallenged, high achieving students may begin to exhibit disruptive behaviors in an attempt to receive attention, or vent their frustrations (Simonsen, Little, & Fairbanks, 2010). One of the contributors to underwhelmment is waiting.

“Waiting occurs when students already know the material, or they learn it more quickly than the others in the class,” (Peine & Coleman, 2010, p. 229). Waiting in class is not a new phenomenon. On any given day, with any given assignment, students work at different paces. Some will be able to work at an adequate independent pace, some will need assistance, some will not finish, and some will finish early, resulting in waiting. The problem with waiting happens when the amount of time a student is not engaged in academically appropriate lessons or activities becomes excessive. With respect to high achieving students, greater amounts of time waiting occur as the range of achievement changes from grade level to grade level. As Gagné’s (2005) study illustrates, the range of academic achievement in a number of grades is wide and varied:

- In grade 1, the best achievers are at least 3 years in front of their average peers, since they perform at the level of average 4th graders;
- In grade 2, the best students are approximately 3 full years more advanced than those at the 75th percentile, and 4 years more advanced than the average second grader;
• In grade 3, the most academically talented students are equivalent to the average 9th grade student;

• In grade 5, the lowest achieving 5th graders work below the average 1st grader, yet the very best achievers in 5th grade perform as well as the top ten percent of ninth graders (p. 145).

Although Gagné’s (2005) study used data accumulated before widespread adoption of RtI and Tiered instruction as a result of standardized tests, one must assume interventions would address the lowest achieving students in this study. The fact remains that a large number of high achieving students are able to operate academically well above their grade levels. Learning and instruction are therefore invariably affected by the results of procedures put into place because of the use of standardized tests.

Assessment Considerations for High Achieving Tier 1 Students

Brown (2012) breaks down five assessment considerations for implementing RtI with gifted learners. School districts should consider that gifted and talented students, (1) exceed curriculum benchmarks, (2) demonstrate a ceiling effect on standardized measures, (3) have content mastery considerations, (4) do not display gifted abilities only to coincide with annual assessments, and (5) need practices that define, identify, and deliver services to meet their needs (Brown, 2012).

High achieving students exceed curriculum benchmarks. Gifted and talented students who perform to potential may have already mastered the core competencies of the curriculum. Therefore, universal screens need to include above level material in order to properly assess and identify high achieving and gifted students. Students who demonstrate the ceiling effect on standardized measures do so because there may not be enough tasks or questions geared to their
level of understanding. If a student scores in a high percentile on a normed reading test, any
growth at the end of the year will appear minimal because there cannot be large percentile gains
recorded. With content mastery, high achieving or gifted students may not perform to the best of
their ability if particular learning tasks are not rigorous enough. To support a high achieving
student, rigorous assessments must be used, or the results of such a learning task will not
accurately reflect the students’ strengths. To address Brown’s (2012) fourth point, gifted
students do not show giftedness only during universal screens. When a student exhibits talent, it
is important to use RtI to intervene with appropriate curriculum in order to support their quest for
knowledge in a flexible manner. Relying solely on one window of opportunity in a school year
is a vast injustice for the identification of talent. Finally, according to Brown (2012), high
achieving students need practices that define, identify, and deliver services to meet their needs.
High achieving students sometimes exhibit ability in one discipline, and not another. Placing a
student who is high achieving in mathematics in a class geared for high end learning in reading
does a disservice not only to the individual student, but the teacher and rest of the classroom
community as well.

Summary
Standardized tests have become an integral part of American education and schooling.
Standardized testing is experienced by nearly every school aged child in the United States today
as a way of ensuring regulatory compliance (Connecticut Department of Education, 2012),
measuring academic progress (Gunzenhauser, 2003), and evaluating teachers and school districts
(Burris & Welner, 2011; Connecticut Department of Education, 2012). Although these
outcomes can be used to improve curriculum and instruction, they can also convey negative
connotations associated with their implementation. Because of the amount of pressure teachers,
schools, and districts feel to perform, many standardized tests have been deemed “high-stakes” (Berliner, 2011; Duncan & Stevens, 2011; Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Kohn, 2000).

The problem of practice related to this literature review examines how teachers in a small, suburban, intermediate school in Connecticut describe the effect that state-wide standardized tests have on their teaching and learning practices with high achieving students. As a result of the potential negative ramifications of not passing high-stakes assessments, standardized tests have affected the educational practice of countless teachers, districts, and students. In many cases, standardized tests have led to narrowing of the curriculum, and lower rigor in the classroom (Berliner, 2011; Burris & Welner, 2011; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Horn, 2003), especially for high-achieving students (Azano, et. al, 2011; Cross, 2007; Dimitriadis, 2012; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010).

**Chapter III: Methodology**

Typically measured by comparing standardized test scores, one of the most significant issues facing education today is the gap between high and low achieving students (NCLB, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Countless school districts have attempted to use a number of methods to reduce this gap and increase student achievement; including smaller class sizes (Barrett & Toma, 2013), tutoring (Klausmeier, 1980), incentives (Levitt, List, Neckermann, & Sadoff, 2012), and Response to Intervention (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2012).

Due to potential ramifications of not performing well on standardized tests, educational practices of countless school districts, teachers, and students have been affected (Madaus, Abrams, & Pedulla, 2003). Schools, with the Damoclean specter of low performance on standardized tests threatening their status, have narrowed their curriculums in the hopes of focusing on tested subjects (Beecher & Sweeney, 2008). As a result, standardized testing has
narrowed the curriculum, and lowered rigor in the classroom, especially for students who are considered high achieving (Azano, Missett, Callahan, Oh, Brunner, Foster, & Moon, 2011; Cross, 2007; Dimitriadis, 2012; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010).

Because research has shown standardized testing has narrowed curriculum and lowered rigor in the classroom (Azano, et. al., 2011; Cross, 2007; Dimitriadis, 2012; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010), findings of this study revolved around two research questions designed to examine and understand teacher descriptions of the effect that state-wide standardized tests have on teaching and learning practices for high achieving students in their classrooms. These two questions guided focus group interview questions that provided the basis for understanding and examining these descriptions.

**Research Questions**

1. How do teachers in a suburban intermediate school in Connecticut describe the effect that state-wide standardized tests have had on teaching and learning practices for students who are able considered high achieving?

2. What are teacher perceptions regarding the level of rigor in the classroom for high achieving students as a result of the increased significance of standardized testing?

**Use of Interpretivist Paradigm**

This basic qualitative study (Merriam, 2009) utilized an Interpretivist paradigm to provide the reader with perspectives as witnessed through the explanation of the participant, as opposed to researcher observed action (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Phenomenologically, among these understandings regarding the active role of the researcher is their relationship to such participants. As such, Interpretivist researchers seek to uncover the multiple realities participants have of their lived experiences (Ponterotto, 2005), allowing explanation of phenomena from the
individual’s point of view in order to better understand behaviors and actions (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). This ontological interpretation holds that participants’ reality is subjective, therefore influenced by context and experiences as reported by the researcher (Ponterotto, 2005). Focus groups of a small sample of participants who deeply reflect upon beliefs will allow for rigor to be judged not on the number of individuals interviewed, but by the thick descriptions they yield (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 130).

Through this process, researchers are susceptible to being “undeniably affected by what they hear and observe in the field, often in unnoticed ways” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 8), therefore caution must be used in order to ensure trustworthiness, quality, and verification (see Trustworthiness, Quality, and Verification section, p. 56).

Research Tradition

This study addresses the descriptions of beliefs of teachers. As such, teacher beliefs regarding the effects of standardized tests on their instruction, and their beliefs regarding their perceptions of how learning occurs in their classrooms were the focus. In this manner, beliefs become the central, overarching issue to be examined. These beliefs represent an issue that would benefit from a general qualitative study in that participant voices would be heard regarding topics that are not easily measured (Creswell, 2013). In the context of legislated, statewide, standardized tests, beliefs cannot be measured quantitatively, nor are teacher’s descriptions of perceived effects taken into account. Basic interpretive study affords the researcher the opportunity to accentuate such beliefs in the context of the school environment.

Rationale for General Qualitative Study

Since “all qualitative research is interpretive” (Merriam, 2014, p. 22), this study constitutes the elements of a general interpretive study including focus groups, observations, and
document analysis (Merriam, 2014). This study method is most appropriate to use in order to develop rich, thick descriptions of phenomena in context, in participants’ own words. Using general qualitative study methods allows for a detailed description of the contextual circumstances surrounding the participants in this particular location, and an analysis of cases to determine a deeper understanding (Stake, 1995) of teachers’ beliefs through exploration, reflection, and dialogue that depict the participants’ “mental map” (Sage, 2008, para. 1). Merriam (2009) holds that this type of study investigates “complex social units” (p. 50) in order to understand phenomena through rich, detailed accounts. As this study is designed to understand and provide insight to an issue (Stake, 1995) such as teacher descriptions of effects of state wide standardized tests on classroom instruction and learning for students who are high achieving, reaching benchmarks more quickly and easily using focus groups, observations, and document analysis, an interpretive, general qualitative study is the most appropriate method to use.

**Research Site**

The research site is located in a small, suburban town in southeastern Connecticut. Similar to many towns in the region, the research site is the only school in the district designated to serve students in its age bracket. The school has a student population of approximately 600 students, of which 89.4% are White, 2.4% Black, and 3.5% Hispanic (Connecticut Department of Education, 2013b). Fifteen point one percent of students receive free or reduced lunch, 1.3% of students are not considered fluent in English, and 12.2% of students are reported as having disabilities (Connecticut Department of Education, 2013b). The school reports 1.9% of the population is identified as gifted and talented, of which 100% are reported as receiving services (Connecticut Department of Education, 2013b).
Participants and Access

The focus population of the study were certified, self-contained classroom teachers who teach content area subjects at the upper elementary level (grades 3-5). The focus population was located in a suburban town located in southeastern Connecticut. The overall classroom teacher population consisted of 8 third grade teachers, 9 fourth grade teachers, and 10 fifth grade teachers. Teachers experience levels ranged from 1 to 36 years classroom experience. At the time of the study, the classroom teacher population consisted of 4 male teachers, and 23 female teachers.

Stratified purposeful (Miles & Huberman, 1994) sampling was utilized. The sample was considered to be stratified purposeful in that representative participants were selected from grades taught at the school, and who have taught students that have taken at least one standardized test. Participants of this study were selected from the overall population of certified, self-contained classroom teachers at the site location. Reading and mathematics are the two subjects that gauge the academic progress of students in grades 3-8 (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008). As this study is concerned with descriptions of the effect that state wide standardized tests have on teaching and learning practices for high-achieving students, participant teachers in this population sample must have taught the tested subjects of language arts and/or mathematics. In order to have perspective; and put teaching and learning in context; participants must also have taught during the administration of at least one state-wide, standardized test. Having these teaching experiences will correspond to the tenets of Abelmann and Elmore’s (2004) Framework of Alignment which guided the overall study.

After consent to perform the study from the local Superintendent, permission to conduct focus group interviews was obtained from the school Principal. In order to accommodate
teachers’ schedules, the Principal allowed the researcher to hold focus group interviews during weekly “WOW” meetings. Held weekly, these WOW meetings are designed to build instructional capacity to ensure student success by providing opportunities to discuss teacher strategies and improve student performance. Focus group interviews were completed using open ended questions using the responsive interview model (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Semi-structured focus group interviews allowed the participants to answer questions “at length and in vivid detail” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 31) allowing for deeper understandings of interview questions (see Appendix E). Due to the understanding that “focus group interviews rely on the interactions that take place among the participants in the group to generate data” (Hatch, 2002, p. 132), the researcher facilitated the discussion of directed topics, thereby allowing participants to agree, disagree, or modify the conversation (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 30) as they interpret their understandings of the phenomena. This study utilized three focus groups, each consisting of teachers representative of grades taught at this particular school. Selecting a focus group with a minimum of 5 teachers allowed for a representative sample of teachers in the school to be established.

In the event of a minimum number of participants, sampling required at least one teacher be representative of each grade taught at the school in order to gain a deeper understanding of descriptions of teachers’ belief at various grade levels. In actuality, all classroom teachers at the school participated in the focus group discussions.

Upon dissemination of the Letter of Introduction (see Appendix A) with permission from the gatekeeper (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), prospective participants were asked to express interest in participation via email, phone, or mail to the researcher. The maximum number of teachers at each grade level did not exceed the maximum recommended number of participants in a focus
group interview (Krueger, 2009). No additional calls for participation were required. As it has been shown incentives do not necessarily influence participation rates (Patton, 2002), and that offering incentives to participants may result in ethical issues on both the part of the researcher and the recipient (Patton, 2002), no incentives were offered to participants. Further, Patton (2002) posits, if research is “…something that professionals feel is important and … it is done in a professional manner, they will participate” (Patton, 2002, p. 414). Discussion regarding the protection of these participants is discussed under “Protection of Human Subjects” (see page 58).

**Data Collection**

Data collection in the form of semi-structured focus group interviews was to take place at a time and location amicable to the participants. Upon commencement of the meeting, the study was discussed and explained. The participants were given the opportunity to reflect on the study and ask any questions they had.

Upon review of consent, participants were reminded of their voluntary status, and that they may rescind consent or refuse to answer any question they so choose. Consent to record the interview (see Appendix B) was explained as well. Data collection commenced after the informed consent process has been completed, and forms collected.

Study participants completed semi-structured focus group interviews during the second trimester of the school year, prior to administration of the Smarter Balanced test. As such, teachers were within the “preparation period” before the test.

**Documents, Document Analysis, and Coding**

Documents that informed the research questions (Creswell, 2011) were collected by the researcher. These documents included lesson plans provided by participants, testing schedules, and copies of emails concerning testing matters including schedules for testing and preparation.
These documents, including any journals related to teacher descriptions, were collected and coded using narrative analysis (Schutt, 2011) to provide additional “…focus on how stories are constructed, rather than on the resulting narrative” (Schutt, 2011, p. 340) using the same criteria as focus group transcripts. Documents were redacted of any identifiable information. Documents that were personal property of participants, including lesson plans, journals, or notes that were not readily able to be collected were, with the participants’ permission, copied using a GeniusScan app on the researcher’s personal, password protected iPhone. All such documents were coded and analyzed for themes in order to provide triangulation (Creswell, 2011; 2013) and validate data from additional sources.

Qualitative data analysis of interview responses, documents, and notes revolved around phenomenological analysis, underscoring the interpretation of how individuals uncover the multiple realities of their lived experiences (Ponterotto, 2005). This allowed for explanation of phenomena from the individual’s point of view, leading to deeper understandings of behaviors and actions (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Upon transcribing interviews, memoing of the transcripts and taking notes on themes that emerged occurred using the coding program QDAMiner Lite. Upon review of notes, emerging themes were compared by the use of a priori codes (Miles & Hubermann, 1994) derived from the guiding conceptual framework. Open coding (Saldana, 2013) was then utilized to find words or phrases used in response to the research questions. This coding was then used in order to further correlate concepts elicited by the data. Direct, in vivo codes were highlighted in each transcript in order to facilitate the use of rich, thick descriptions in participants’ own words. Upon reflection, axial coding (Saldana, 2013), or the process of making connections between concepts and categories for responses, was done in order to
correlate to the research questions. Additionally, a QDAMiner Lite codebook was utilized throughout to ensure accurate coding was performed.

Using QDAMiner Lite, codes were then broken down by grade level focus group. Using a web based word frequency display, themes determined by coding were sorted and presented visually. In this representation, words and phrases with the highest frequency are presented in larger text (see figure 2, p. 67).

Coded responses were analyzed and categorized using QDAMiner Lite. This process enabled the researcher to compile responses in a visual manner and come to interpret the participants’ answers to the research questions. These codes later became themed, and related to the framework guiding the study.

Any tangible material collected, including work samples, artifacts, notes taken by the researcher, transcripts, or other anecdotal material were also coded and analyzed for themes in order to provide triangulation (Creswell, 2011; 2013). This data was then transferred into the QDAMiner Lite codebook.

Although general qualitative study utilizes descriptive elements in order to provide thick, rich descriptions (Creswell, 2013), analysis of data related to this study incorporated frequency coding in order to determine words or phrases that were common in responses. This process assisted in codeweaving (Saldana, 2013) in order to “reflect on and write about emergent patterns, categories, themes, concepts, and assertions” (Saldana, 2013, p. 45).

**Field notes**

Descriptive and reflective field notes allow for the creation of rich descriptions of the problem (Creswell, 2011). During focus group interviews, notes of participants’ responses, behaviors, reactions, and interactions were written down in order to provide the researcher with
the means to reflect on not only how participants responded verbally, but how they responded physically through gestures and body language as well. Additionally, field notes of agenda items, discussion topics, and interactions between participants were collected during staff meetings. These descriptive and reflective field notes (Creswell, 2011) were collected in order to both analyze and interpret (Suter, 2011) teacher beliefs.

Recordings

All interviews were digitally audio recorded using two devices. The researcher utilized a Philips DVT 1700 Digital Voice Tracer, as well as the researcher’s personal iPad using an app entitled Voice Record HD.

Data storage

Upon completion of the interviews, all media files were transferred to the researcher’s personal, password protected computer. Recorded interviews were subsequently erased from recording devices. No online retrieval system was used. In order to avoid discovery of participants, “composite stories” (Creswell, 2012, p. 60) were used. Any physical material collected, including work samples, artifacts, notes taken by the researcher, transcripts, documents, or other anecdotal material was secured in a locking file cabinet located in the researcher’s office, accessible only by the researcher. All material was deleted/destroyed at the conclusion of the study. Notes were coded, analyzed, and destroyed at the conclusion of the study. All documents will be/were deleted/destroyed at the conclusion of the study, after a time prescribed using parameters set by IRB.

Trustworthiness, Quality, and Verification

“All research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner” (Merriam, 2014, p. 209). In order to provide this valid and reliable knowledge,
qualitative researchers seek “trustworthiness” (Creswell, 2013, p. 246) in order to rigor to support research. In order to do this, qualitative researchers must use substantive validation (Creswell, 2013) by way of “understanding one’s own topic, understandings derived from other sources, and the documentation of this process in the written study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 248).

Cited in Creswell (2013), Lincoln and Guba (1985) use the terms “credibility, authenticity, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (Creswell, 2013, p. 246) as surrogates for typically quantitative terms. Here, the quantitative term validity is replaced by the qualitative terms credibility, and transferability (Trochim, 2006). Authenticity is derived from the consensual validation (Eisner, 1991 in Creswell, 2013), or the consensus of active participants in the research agreeing the “situation is right” (Creswell, 2013, p. 246). Similar to the quantitative term reliability, dependability indicates qualitative results will be applicable under changing circumstances (Creswell, 2013), whereas confirmability substantiates the value of the data (Creswell, 2013).

As “any report of research is a representation by the author” (Creswell, 2013, p. 250), validation strategies must be referenced in order to ensure researchers “employ accepted strategies to document the accuracy of their studies” (Creswell, 2013, p. 250). As general qualitative studies examine not only interview and focus group data but documents as well, more emphasis on validation to establish trustworthiness and multiple validation strategies (Creswell, 2013) were used in this study.

Among the procedures available to validate qualitative studies, this researcher used triangulation; detailed, thick descriptions; and member checking (Creswell, 2013) to ensure trustworthiness was established. By using various data sources such as interviews, documents, and observations, triangulation allows the researcher to view evidence through multiple
perspectives (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998). Detailed, thick, rich descriptions allow others to determine contexts, augmenting transference of information to other settings as they see fit (Creswell, 2013). In addition, member checking was utilized in order to allow participants to determine if the researcher has succinctly and accurately captured their interpretations of the data (Creswell, 2013) and was offered to check accuracy of the account (Creswell, 2011, p. 259). Combined, these three procedures provide adequate trustworthiness to ensure validation.

**Biases**

The researcher using qualitative means becomes an instrument of research themselves (Creswell, 2013). As such, researchers design their own questions, seeking to expand on scholarly literature. The very questions the researcher designs, and how they code their responses, may reflect biases. Personal biases and experiences have the potential to skew the perspective of the researcher. Awareness of biases allowed research to progress in an uninhibited manner, free from processes influenced by personal positionality. Personal position must be controlled in a manner to account for and control (Machi & McEvoy, 2012) my biases in selecting the direction of research, what is reported, and how data is analyzed. Biases have the potential to affect how my research is completed, and how results are interpreted. One must have an open mind when embarking on research, uncovering unknowns whether they support biases or not. This bias was ameliorated by the use of triangulation using analysis of focus group interviews, documents and observations; detailed, thick, descriptions of participants’ responses; and member checking (Creswell, 2013) which screened analysis to ensure interpretations of data were accurate.
Protection of Human Subjects

The ethical protection of research participants is a responsibility that must be of paramount importance in any research situation (Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). These ethical responsibilities form the basis of a research relationship which assures that “the interviewees do not come to harm as a result of the research” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 85).

Ethical behavior demands the strict adherence to certain parameters when dealing with research participants. Among these demands is a requirement that the researcher show respect, honor promises, not pressure the participant, and do no harm (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, pp. 85-89).

As no data may be collected or research conducted prior to approval by the University (NEU, 2014), the Application for Approval for Use of Human Participants in Research (NEU, 2014) was completed with the most accurate, complete information available prior to commencement of research (Creswell, 2011). Upon submission and approval of said IRB Application, this researcher coordinated the implementation of this study with the district Superintendent, as well as the school Principal who oversees the teacher participants. The principal of the school acted as the gatekeeper (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) for the study. A copy of the thesis proposal (see Appendix C) was submitted to both the Superintendent and the Principal in order to gain permission to conduct research at the site. Upon approval by the Superintendent of the district (see Appendix D), scheduling of data collection began. In all documents, pseudonyms were used in order to maintain confidentiality.

**Benefits and risks.** Benefits and risks associated with the study were explained and discussed both verbally, and in writing (see Appendix B). Benefits of the study included opportunity for participants to voice their professional descriptions and beliefs regarding the
effects of standardized tests on instruction and learning with regard to high achieving students, and to have those descriptions of beliefs contribute to scholarly literature.

Risks associated with the study were also explained and discussed. Although there is no foreseeable physical harm associated with this study, any participant in any research is subject to a certain amount of risk (Creswell, 2013). Included in this risk is the possibility of potential political ramifications of taking part in the study. As the site is a relatively small school, chances are very high administrators will have intimate knowledge of each participant, with the chance possibility of determining the identity of individuals taking part in the study. As the researcher is seeking to understand teachers’ descriptions of the effects of standardized tests on instruction and learning, opinions potentially expressed by teachers could contradict district or administrative policy. Such contradictions could potentially place participants in an untenable situation, potentially affecting feedback and evaluation. It was also disclosed that participants may feel discomfort or apprehension discussing their candid feelings regarding research questions, and as such, they may choose to not answer such questions without adverse consequences.

**Informed consent.** Informed consent is more than the signing of a consent form (Creswell, 2011; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Informed consent is an ongoing process requiring multiple steps. The first step in the consent process consists of an initial meeting with the participant. During this meeting, a copy of the consent agreement (see Appendix B) was presented and explained in a non-pressured environment (Creswell, 2011) amicable to the participant. Both verbally and in writing, participants were made aware of their rights under the guidelines of the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (U. S. Department of Education Protection of Human Subjects, 2011). Special care was taken to explain the role the participant
would play, and what they would be expected to do, including notification that they would be recorded using an audio device. The participants were given time to privately contemplate their prospective participation in the study. Throughout the process, the researcher reiterated to the participants that consent was voluntary and ongoing, and they were free and able to withdraw from the study at any time, with absolutely no ramifications. Prior to signing the consent form, the researcher provided an additional question and answer period to address any questions that arose regarding the study, consent, or participation. No undue pressure was exerted in order to ascertain participants, or consent. Participants were also informed they did not have to sign consent forms and take part in the study (Creswell, 2013, p. 58).

Participants had the right to rescind consent and refuse participation at any point during the study, regardless of whether they had signed the consent agreement or not. The researcher continually ensured the participants knew their rights on an ongoing basis, and were voluntarily consenting to all research tasks. As the researcher, care was taken to be aware of any signs of undue stress or apprehension on the part of the participants (ASH, n.d.), and to give the participant the option of continuation, with no adverse ramifications.

Upon acceptance to participate in the study, informed consent (see Appendix B) was signed, dated, and collected. A copy of such form was provided to the participant for their records. In compliance with Northeastern University Institutional Review Board regulations, signed consent forms will be maintained in a secure, locking file cabinet accessible to only the researcher for a time not less than 3 years after the conclusion of the study.

Confidentiality. Not only is it imperative to inform participants of their voluntary status throughout the study, the researcher has an obligation to ensure no identifying information is included. In order to ensure this, coding and the use of pseudonyms was utilized with
participants (Creswell, 2012). In order to determine pseudonyms, the researcher used www.randomnames.com to select random names. In the event that a random pseudonym used the same first letter of an actual name, or if a randomly generated name contained phonetic components of a participant’s actual name (i.e. – Pat/Matt), a new name was generated. Names were coded and stored using password protection in Microsoft Excel. These files were saved locally to the researcher’s password protected computer. No online retrieval system was used.

In addition to the teachers as participants, due diligence must be taken to ensure the school district itself is not identifiable. Fictitious names for the school and district were utilized to avoid undue scrutiny after publication of this study.

Interviews were double recorded to ensure capture. The researcher utilized a Philips DVT 1700 Digital Voice Tracer, as well as the researcher’s personal iPad using an app entitled Voice Record HD. Upon completion of the interviews, all media files were transferred to the researcher’s personal, password protected computer. These files were then encrypted onto the researcher’s personal computer, accessible to only the researcher. Any tangible material collected, including work samples, artifacts, notes taken by the researcher, transcripts, or other anecdotal material were secured in a locking file cabinet located in the researcher’s office, and accessible only by the researcher. No online retrieval system was utilized. Recorded interviews were subsequently erased from recording devices upon transcription. In order to avoid discovery of participants, in addition to the use of pseudonyms, “composite stories” (Creswell, 2012, p. 59) were used.

**Chapter IV: Report of Study Findings**

**Introduction**

This general qualitative study was conducted to examine and understand teacher descriptions regarding the effects that state wide standardized tests have on teaching and learning
practices for high-achieving students in a small, suburban, intermediate school in Connecticut. Preparation related to mandated state-wide tests formed the basis for this study. Since standardized test results have become the criteria by which to gauge underperforming students, schools, and districts, a great deal of emphasis is placed on raising scores. Statewide, districts began transitioning to the Smarter Balanced test began during the 2013-2014 school year. As implementation of the Smarter Balanced test continues, the purpose of this research was to establish a foundation of understanding regarding teacher’s descriptions of how standardized tests affect not only instruction, but also learning of high achieving students. This study further examined allocation of resources for high achieving students in the classroom and implications for rigor.

In order to examine these issues, three focus group interviews were conducted to answer the research questions. Documents that supported focus group discussions were also analyzed. Focus group interviews and documents were transcribed, coded, and analyzed in order to discover common themes between respondents. These themes were further analyzed and compiled into findings of the study.

The first section of this chapter provides a brief introduction of the study site and its history of standardized testing, and a description of participants. The second section of the chapter examines the following research questions:

1. How do teachers in a suburban intermediate school in Connecticut describe the effect that state-wide standardized tests have had on teaching and learning practices for students who are considered high achieving?

2. What are teacher perceptions regarding the level of rigor in the classroom for high achieving students as a result of the increased significance of standardized testing?
Study Site

This study took place in one suburban Connecticut intermediate school, located in a small, suburban southeastern town. Covering grades 3 through 5, the school has a student population of approximately 600 students, of which approximately 90% are White, 3% are Black, and 4% Hispanic. Approximately 15% of students receive free or reduced lunch, nearly 2% of students are not considered fluent in English, and approximately 12% of students are reported as having disabilities. By its own assessments, the school reports 2% of the population is identified as gifted and talented. This number does not include students that are considered high achieving.

From the 2005-2006 to the 2012-2013 school year, students in Connecticut have taken the Fourth Generation Connecticut Mastery Test. During the 2013-2014 school year, Connecticut districts were allowed the discretion to administer a field test of the newly adopted Smarter Balanced test without the need for mandated reporting. In order to establish a baseline from which to measure themselves, the district hosting the research site for this study opted to field test the Smarter Balanced test in 2013-2014. Beginning with the 2014-2015 school year, districts lost their testing discretion, becoming required by the State of Connecticut to administer the Smarter Balanced test to students in grades 3 through 8.

As a grade 3-5 school, administration of Smarter Balanced testing is required by statute during a period of time in spring of the school year known as a testing window. During this testing window, every student in the school is required to take a computer adaptive test measuring their understanding of mathematics and English language arts curriculum. In the case of the research site, each class rotates between 4 classroom sized computer labs, with each test session proctored by the classroom teacher, a reading or math specialist, and a paraprofessional.
Results are automatically calculated by the computer, and then reported to the State Department of Education. During the 2014-2015 school year, these test results formed a baseline by which to assess student improvement. During the 2015-2016 school year, scores will directly affect teacher and school performance indicators, thereby increasing importance of high test scores. Through study research, it is apparent instruction and learning of high achieving students is heavily affected by the culture of standardized testing.

Description of Participants

Twenty-seven third through fifth grade teachers in one particular Connecticut school district participated in semi-structured focus group interviews. In addition to these focus groups, document analysis and classroom teacher observation revealed descriptions of teachers’ beliefs regarding testing and high achieving students in their classrooms.

Participant teachers’ classroom experience ranged from 1 to 36 years. Participants consisted of certified, self-contained classroom teachers who teach content area subjects in grades 3 through 5. Representing a collective experience level of 424 combined teaching years, third grade participant teachers ranged in experience level from 1 to 30 years, fourth grade teachers from 9 to 25 years, and fifth grade teachers from 1 to 36 years. Across the study, participants in the focus groups averaged 16 years of experience. All teachers have previously administered state-wide standardized tests. Out of the 27 teachers interviewed, 2 have a bachelor’s degree in education or equivalent field, with 25 having earned a master’s degree or above in an education related field. For the purposes of this study, all participant names were changed (see Participants and Access, p. 50).

Table 1: Teacher/participant experience levels

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<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
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<tr>
<td>Grade</td>
<td>3</td>
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Findings

In order to examine and understand teacher descriptions of the effects standardized tests have had on instruction and learning of high achieving students, the researcher conducted three semi-structured focus group interviews with 27 teachers. These discussions were supported by document analysis and revealed a number of themes common between grade level teachers.

Recurring Themes

Study participants revealed a number of responses as to why their instruction and students’ learning practices are affected by standardized tests. Coding produced from focus group interviews revealed several commonalities between grades 3, 4, and 5. Coding frequency (see Figure 2) reveals common themes between each of the grade levels interviewed.

Figure 2: Illustration of Code Frequency

These recurring themes provided the basis for the findings of the study. The findings from these three focus groups, organized by research question, are presented in this section.
**Research question 1.** How do teachers in a suburban intermediate school in Connecticut describe the effect that state-wide standardized tests have had on teaching and learning practices for students who are considered high-achieving?

Responses in relation to Research Question 1 were discussed with three separate focus groups, broken down by grade level. Table 2 illustrates common themes emerging from these focus group interviews.

Table 2: *Themes in relation to the question: How do teachers in a suburban intermediate school in Connecticut describe the effect that state-wide standardized tests have on teaching and learning practices for students who are considered high-achieving?*

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<th>Theme</th>
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<tr>
<td>Time devoted to testing and test preparation is excessive</td>
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<td>Resources/time devoted to Tier 2/3 exceed those devoted to Tier 1</td>
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<td>A lack of resources for high achieving students exists</td>
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<td>Pacing speeds instruction and revolves around test preparation</td>
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<td>Narrowing of the curriculum negatively impacts science and social studies</td>
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*Time devoted to testing and test preparation is excessive.* Although students in the district take many standardized tests throughout the year, the greatest amount of attention is directed at the Smarter Balanced test, a derivative of the SBAC test. Smarter Balanced testing commenced the day after spring vacation ended in April, 2015. During the four weeks after testing commenced, one participant indicated that they had had only two "normal" days of instruction. These "irregular" weeks after the start of testing consisted of finishing tests that took longer than expected or estimated, making up missed tests, or administering progress monitors
and universal screens required at the end of the year. One of the first issues that raised contention in the groups was the amount of time teachers felt they needed to devote to test preparation.

Frustration on the part of teachers became evident when discussing the amount of time taken from classroom learning and instruction in order to focus on test preparation that is “disconnected and doesn’t make sense to them” (S. Fox, Grade 3, February 3, 2015). Furthermore, teachers throughout the focus groups lamented the time taken away from classroom time where students may be engaged in more active learning, frustrated by the excessive time devoted to testing throughout the school year. As third grade teacher M. Holt describes these conditions, “It’s not purposeful learning, and to have it take so much time, I mean, our school was what, two months of test and prep? It felt like forever!” (M. Holt, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

In many cases, teachers felt that their high achieving students were already adept at navigating the test, or were able to more quickly finish the test, leaving them at the mercy of stagnation while classmates finished their testing obligations, as illustrated by H. Rodgers, "When one of your kids is making up the test, or they are taking finishing what they didn't get them in in the previous session, you need to be there. That's time you're not in your classroom teaching" (H. Rodgers, Grade 4, May 25, 2015). This time away from classroom teaching was seen as counterproductive to student centered learning, leaving students who are high achieving to engage in either mundane tasks and learning they were already familiar with, or were left to engage in independent projects.

With the initiation of the Smarter Balanced test, time normally devoted to classroom instruction had to be reallocated to learning about the logistics of the test, including how to
navigate through the computer screens associated with each section of the assessment.

Frustrated, one participant voiced their exasperation at losing even more classroom time to test prep when they could be providing deeper instruction, especially to their higher level students. “…And we're taking, or, will be soon, taking instructional time away from our content to show them how to navigate SBAC (Smarter Balanced); how to use the tools or when you have a split screen” (S. Fox, Grade 3, February 3, 2015). Even though many teachers have experienced little to no “buy in” with the Smarter Balanced test, many participants expressed a heightened sense of urgency for students to be able to navigate the questions on the tests due to their desire to complete the assessments as soon as possible.

Some study participants also felt misled as to how much time and effort was estimated to be devoted to tests this school year, as opposed to actual times dedicated to time out of the classroom. As one participant noted, “The State estimated the total amount of time spent on Smarter Balanced tests was supposed to be seven hours per child. In reality, try more like 20 to 30” (personal communication May 26, 2015). Including prep time, these 20 to 30 hours per child potentially translate to between 400 and 600 combined hours of Smarter Balanced testing for a 20 student classroom. Consequently, many participants expressed concern that this time out of the normal classroom/teaching routine detracted from the amount of time available to work more deeply with students of all levels.

Document analysis supports this notion, and reveals a glimpse of the amount of time required to prepare for and take the Smarter Balanced test. Documents reveal each student received an average of 4 hours of “screen time” just in preparation for the test. This screen time included learning how to log on to computers, learning how to navigate computer tools for each section, and sampling different types of questions. By teacher descriptions, this time does not
include time in the regular classroom used to cover material used in performance tasks, or test specific skill building. In addition to computer screen time that all students endured, considerable amounts of time were devoted to building tested skills during tiered instruction in the classroom. This instruction, primarily focused on Tiers 2 and 3, in turn affected the resources available to high achieving students.

*Resources/time devoted to Tier 2/3 exceed those devoted to Tier 1.* So engrained is the perception to focus on lower tiered instruction, participants across all grade levels needed to be reminded of the focus of the study revolved around their high achieving students during group discussions. Much of the discrepancy in resources and time fall within the auspices of tiered instruction. “A lot of my middle students, my low students, are taught during SGI [Small Group Instruction] and a lot of my time is spent on the middle students” (S. Taylor, Grade 4, February 4, 2015).

Although teachers described a variety of achievement levels in their classroom populations, most participants indicated the overall emphasis of instruction revolved around Tier 2 and 3 students. Though the participants in this study were asked to focus on high-achieving students, respondents were careful to include the justification of teaching those considered to be Tier 2 and 3. As one participant acknowledged, “We are teaching to the low kids” (personal communication, March 10, 2015). Participants across the grade levels generally estimated as high as 90 percent of their daily instruction revolves around Tier 2 and 3 students. Reasons for this percentage revolve around attempting to fill knowledge gaps in pursuit of test preparation. “During SGI reading and SGI math, I’m working with the kids who need help” (G. Pearson, Grade 4 participant, February 4, 2015). As one third grade participant observed,
Well, I think with the instruction is that these kids we have coming up don't have all the steps that they need for this program, so while we're trying to teach them the things that the need, we also have to try to teach what they were supposed to have learned in kindergarten and first grade (W. Fergusson, February 3, 2015).

Although designed to accommodate all levels of students, general consensus between the grade levels indicates daily Small Group Instruction time revolves around Tier 2 and 3 instruction. In order to provide the most students with the most academic growth, high-achieving students are afforded the least amount of small group instruction time, yet this division of time and resources is often rationalized due to high achieving students perceived abilities. As another third grade participant notes,

Well, for example, my reading groups, I'll meet with my lower kids three to four times a week and my high, my reading group I meet with once a week – but they are also more, uh, they have better abilities to be in, independent as well, so, I wouldn't say, I wouldn't say that they're getting shafted, but they have the ability to work more on their own (W. Ball, February 3, 2015).

A number of participants translated the ability to "work more on their own" to high achieving students being able to self-organize, self-monitor, and self-differentiate their learning. When probed further, participants conveyed the idea that Small Group Instruction (SGI) was time to “work with the lower students” in order to make them proficient in subjects they would be tested on. According to participants, this accountability drives instruction focusing on “making the lower kids score better.” As one third grade participant stated, “I feel like it's, it's accountability; teacher accountability and, you know, are your kids doing well, and, if not, why,
you know, why aren't they making the growth? Why aren't they, um, performing in math and reading?” (F. Maldonado, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

Participants convey that this pressure to be accountable for raising Tier 2 and 3 scores to proficient levels on standardized tests directly affects teacher instruction for high-achieving students. “Again, because those standardized tests are tied to our evaluation and we are most concerned about those kids coming up. It's crazy” (S. Long, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

While justifying being able to “work on their own” due to expectations and perceptions of abilities, one participant indicated the “teacher time” imbalance may not be fair. As they noted, “I guess I feel, um, I always feel a little bit of guilt because I feel like I’m, I’m expecting those kids to, um, self-direct for so long because I’m spending time with the strugglers” (E. Powell, Grade 5, February 5, 2015). Although there are feelings such as guilt, participants also express gratitude at the ability to spend time with high achieving students. As one third grade teacher expressed this sentiment, “Yeah, that's how you always feel and it's always so enjoyable when you get to actually spend some time with those high students” (W. Ball, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

Although standardized tests continue to be a driving factor, teachers are quick to explain the time and resources they dedicate to Tier 2 and 3 students goes beyond making students proficient for state-wide exams. Celebrating the work of students by acknowledging their efforts and abilities, teachers readily defend the use of small group instruction in order to complement the abilities of Tier 2 and Tier 3 learners. As expressed by one participant,

You want it to be, um, you know, helpful for everybody, so I'm finding, like, during a writer's workshop, I'm really running around during that conference time, um, supporting very low writers or kids who really need that extra, you know, scaffolding with kids who
simply want to just read to you what they wrote, which is beneficial, too (M. Holt, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

However, participants acknowledged this time devoted to Tier 2 and Tier 3 detracts from the amount of time spent with high achieving students. As one participant noted, "...there's no direct instruction for them. You don't have time" (S. Holland, Grade 5, February 6, 2015).

For those times when teachers are able to devote their attention to high-achieving students in small group, they are unable to provide complete and thorough instruction. When discussing this concept, participants in general became more animated, stressing the importance of the topic. In an effort to express their opinions, teachers eagerly volunteered recollections of their experiences of attempting to instruct high achieving students in small group, only to be compelled to devote time back to Tier 2 and 3 students. As one participant sums up the group consensus,

There's no time to continue, you can teach them a quick method and they can do it, but there is no time to really dive deep with them, like, you can't do like a math problem that's involving that, that you would actually have to walk them through it. You don't, we don't have time for that, for those (high achieving) kids (J. Bailey, Grade 4, February 4, 2015).

This type of instructional method lends itself to abbreviated, superficial lessons in which high achieving students do not receive equitable time and resources compared to their Tier 2 and 3 counterparts. Mirroring a number of participants comments, one individual summed up the experience by stating, “So, it's kind of like a hit-and-run type of instructional design with these high-achieving kids, like, okay they are making this amount, or they're doing this level of work, so we'll give them this quickly within a few minutes” (I. Patterson, Grade 4, February 6, 2015).
A lack of resources for high achieving students exists. More and more, teachers are expected to not only differentiate for high-achieving students, but also to provide the services previously provided by enrichment teachers in pull-out situations. In the case of the selected research site, one enrichment teacher position went from full time, to split time between two schools, to part-time between schools, to being eliminated due to budget concerns in the year prior to this study. According to teachers, this has made a direct impact on their instruction, and students’ learning in their classroom:

It's not that we don't want to reach them and it's not that we can't reach them, you know. We're not capable of teaching them. Given the nature of the beast here, where we don't have the time in our classroom to do that and we don't have an enrichment teacher anymore, that's why we are saying we spend 10 percent of our time with them at the most (E. Powell, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

According to participants in the study, teacher to high-achieving student time is sacrificed in the name of accountability to test scores. Not only is time a factor, high achieving students are often deficient in resources as well. As one participant indicates, “Definitely, I do think that the high students will, will always not get the same amount of time as the low and – without any programs or resources, really” (W. Ferguson, Grade 3, February 3, 2015). Although much classroom focus is on “lower learners,” feelings of personal responsibility cause teachers to try to supplement instruction for high achievers to the best of their abilities. In order to meet the needs of their high achieving students, teachers have become more creative with time management in order to meet the needs of their high-achieving students.

Many teachers that they had to think creatively to address the lack of resources for high achieving students such as relying on parent volunteers to provide individualized supports for
students. Many teachers turned to a book club model and parent volunteers to address the lack of time they are able to devote to extended lessons. Although many in the discussion felt this method was a way to increase parent involvement in the school, most participants questioned the ability of parents; who may not have any formal educational training; to adequately address the requirements of high-achieving students. In this case, parents have essentially become a teacher surrogate, but the educative quality of that time can be questionable. As one participant comments:

We have a lot of resources to support those lower kids and a lot of – labs and groups, but we don't have much right now for those high-achieving students and I think some of us have turned to the book club model during some of our SGI time for the higher kids. I know some of us also have volunteer parents that are coming in to lead those groups, just to enrich them in literature. I'm finding, though, that because they're high readers, the content is always… can be difficult to find for them because, even though they are strong readers, they're not, you know, developmentally ready for some of that content that comes within those types of novels (T. Owen, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

Some teachers feel the parent volunteer method of teaching not only dilutes the quality of instruction for high achievers, it often places them in situations where students do not complete the learning they anticipated, further straining the few resources and time available they have to “bring students back up to speed.”

Even among participants in the focus groups, a debate arose over whether high achieving students actually needed additional teacher to student face time. One participant, arguing that not only do high-achieving students not need additional teacher time, it may ultimately benefit them after their school career. In making her point, one teacher stated:
I think that's the element of the higher kids, those, that they can work and as long as you're giving them (independent) time, then, I mean, that's ultimately kind of allowing them to do what, you know, we want everybody to be able to learn on their own. Once you finish school, are you going to stop learning? No. But have you, kind of instilled that, the desire to continue becoming intelligent every single day, and so with those higher kids, are we allowing them that opportunity at least? We don’t have to be there with them because they don't need that. The kids that are lower need us. (O. McKenzie, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

As another participant pushed back, challenging the quality of such an instructional practice for high achieving students, the initial respondent readily replied with conviction:

Yeah. Quality. Right. It is a quality opportunity? Yes, it’s a quality opportunity for them to learn at their pace, at that higher level of a high-interest subject, um, and that's, um because, the enrichment program to some degree was that though that they had that with (enrichment teacher) um, and it was maybe, I don't know a few times a week (O. McKenzie, February 5, 2015).

So great is the need for additional time and resources for high achieving students, the school reading consultant was enlisted to provide an advanced reading group for students. Piloted in one class level, third-grade students who scored within the top 95% of a computer adaptive STAR progress monitor test met weekly to read and discuss stories in the Junior Great Books series. Out of approximately 180 students in third grade, a total of 20 students were "accepted" into this high-level group. Initially envisioned as a group consisting of students in the top 90% of STAR tests, sheer numbers of students scoring above the 90% threshold created groups too large to manage. This inability to "service" even the top 10% of reading students in
third grade illustrates the shortage of resources and time available for high achieving students. Students scoring between 90 and 94 percent therefore experienced classroom instruction only.

Teachers applaud creative solutions such as this extension, but are wary of allowing their expectations to rise for fear this will become another pilot program that does not live to fruition. Increased concentration on tested subjects, and expectations to perform on tests in the name of accountability have driven teachers to spend less and less time with their high achieving students. Without outlets such as the pilot created by the reading consultant, high achieving students would be left with limited direct instructional time in the regular classroom.

Participants indicate that as their instruction has become more data driven, their resources have dwindled in an effort to make other students proficient on benchmarks. As many high achieving students are, by context able to score well on benchmarks, they are seen as less of a priority when analyzing data. As a fourth grade participant indicated, “I think if you had done this research maybe three/four years ago, when (enrichment teacher) was here, um, I think that your percentage of time to enrich their learning or to extend their learning would be a lot greater” (M. Carter, Grade 4, February 6, 2015).

Instructional materials are also lacking for high achieving students. What used to be designated for use with top students are now required to be disseminated to groups of all abilities. “First of all, everything that, all the materials we have that used to be for the high group are now required for everybody and we don't have that person anymore” (O. McKenzie, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

Creatively enriching high achieving students’ instruction through the use of personnel and sharing of resources has limitations however. Participants showed particularly egregious
reactions when one opportunity seemed to present itself, only to be determined not acceptable, nor available to classroom teachers:

Even (math consultant) was going to start a group with all high kids and then she was told she couldn't do it because (math consultant's) job description says she can't teach or something like that, so, the resources we do have, actually have been told, we've been told that they can't be used for small group instruction for high-achieving students (O. McKenzie, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

According to virtually all participants in the study, the strict emphasis in the classroom is not on high achieving students, but students who are "needier." When directly asked whether there is an emphasis on instruction for high achieving students, responses were a resounding "no" across all three grade levels. Recalling her own child’s experiences within the school district, one participant felt a personal connection to the high-achieving student debate, and presented a poignant narration of their daughter’s experiences as a high achieving student at the research site:

Um, I guess my concern is, you know, I know we try to accommodate, but I know, historically, enrichment or high-achieving kids, if there's no program, tend to get paired up with the lower kids who need help, um, or end up with a lot of free time. I can think of my daughter cleaning cabinets, running copies and, um, she had a wasted year of because she finished her stuff and then she'd have nothing to do and she would be paired up with someone who was low or she'd be straightening cabinets, cleaning and running copies and doing clerical stuff for the teacher and, I, I guess, I don't know. I just, um, you know, I think we, as a grade level, work really hard, um, but I'm not sure that's always the case and I think when you've got those kids that do the working get done and then, and
then what direction do they have and what are the offerings for them? (F. Maldonaldo, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

Upon this recollection, other participants nodded their heads in acquiescence, yet voiced disbelief that such activities would transpire. One participant in particular incredulously asked why her daughter wouldn’t have been a priority. Her answer:

I really think she wasn't a priority because she wasn't a concern. Her academics were excellent and she was not the focus, which, as a teacher, I mean, our focus is on those low kids, because they demand so much of our time and our energy, but that, but with the byproduct of that for her was not a good, not a good year. I'm sure part of it was the standardized testing but I know in the last few years with the whole Tier 1/Tier2/Tier 3 thing is the accountability to, for us, on a daily basis, for those Tier 2 and Tier 3 kids and constantly documenting and assessing and reassessing, documenting and the focus is on those Tier 2 and Tier 3 kids (F. Maldonaldo, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

Clearly, teachers feel their instruction is affected by what resources are available to them. Through creativity and ingenuity, however, some teachers are able to readjust schedules and increase face time with students through the use of parent volunteers and use of shared resources. However, even more than lack of resources, teachers in the focus groups commented on one element of the culture of standardized testing that is even greater force within the school: pacing.

**Pacing speeds instruction and revolves around test preparation.** One of the most discussed topics throughout the grade level focus group interviews was the concept of instructional pacing and its influence on teaching and learning in the classroom. To illustrate the importance placed on pacing at the research site, J. Bowman readily offered the following, “We’ve never had so many deadlines! I mean, the amount of deadlines for getting writing done,
getting your math units done, getting your reading units done. I think we're supposed to give our reading unit test on Friday” (J. Bowman, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

Teachers report pacing is enforced by the use of pacing charts, deadlines, and pressure to conform. Subjects of these deadlines include progress monitors, universal screens, and unit tests. In the case of universal screens and progress monitors, computer adaptive testing is used resulting in automatic recording of information, which is immediately available to administration. Deadlines for reporting such information have increased since the perceived importance of standardized testing has grown, emphasizing the pace at which teachers must progress through the curriculum. As E. Wolfe, a seasoned fourth grade teacher explains;

It's definitely more intense and it's more stressful, I think, for us and, therefore, the students because it's a push-down effect. Your administration comes down on the teachers for deadlines and, and, test scores and everything else and so, you've got to, kind of, keep your kids rushed (E. Wolfe, Grade 4, February 6, 2015).

Pacing at the research site not only puts pressure on teachers, it also puts pressure on students. The culture of testing permeates through daily lessons and affects students interpret their school experiences, placing undue stress on high achieving students to perform to their own expectations. F. Maldonado, a teacher with over 20 years of classroom experience explains:

I had a girl last year and she was used to every Friday there were tests and she would hate Fridays and she would get so anxious and she's like, ‘Do we have test on Friday? Is it Friday? Is there a test comin' out?’ I mean, she was just – so stressed! And I just said to her, ‘It's not a big deal. No we don't have all these tests on Friday,’ and it took me probably a good half the year to get her de-stressed about the anxiety. And this was a very high-achieving, very capable little girl and it was sad to see, but then they'd be
competitive, I noticed, because I had that core group. ‘Well, how did you do? Well, what did you get?’ That’s all she compared herself to (F. Maldonado, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

Although often cited and promoted as a means to determine student strengths and weaknesses, teachers believe the reasons behind standardized tests revolve around accountability of their actions. Many participants feel that the tests do not actually measure students, nor do they give timely feedback in order to adjust instruction. As the example below illustrates, participants feel pacing resulting from the attempts to cover enough test material presents itself as an unnecessary burden that takes away from teachers’ professional judgment and abilities:

We know our kids. I mean, you can know your kids within the first month or two, fairly well, and know what you have to concentrate on. You don't need some standardized data test to tell you this is where I'm gonna focus my efforts. You just don't. And if you do, then you shouldn't be teaching (A. Hamilton, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

Participants clearly indicate that pacing affects not only their instruction, but student learning as well. With such emphasis on covering material that is likely to be tested, teachers are no longer allowed to use their professional judgment to determine students' needs, and the best methods to teach. According to these conversations, the accelerated pace of instruction has a direct impact on high achieving students in participants' classrooms. As this concept was discussed within the focus group, the conversation between two participants revealed not only how pacing affects instructional methods, but also the type of support high achieving students receive:

You used to be able to see what your class needed and then do different teaching methods based on their needs, but now we have to teach it this way. If they don't get it, it's too
bad, move on and be rushed. And I think, and I think that's one of the reasons why we're not able to challenge those, high kids (B. Reeves, Grade 4, February 6, 2015).

Participants firmly convey that not being able to address the needs of students in class leads to a direct conflict with the educational well-being of high achieving students. As the conversation proceeded, another teacher participant volunteered how high achieving students are serviced in their classrooms. Due to the hurried pace of the emphasized curriculum and the focus on students that still have academic gaps, high achieving students are often subject to minimal teacher resources. When asked to expand on the meaning of this, M. Luna, a teacher with vast experience working with advanced students volunteered:

They sit during the lesson. They get it within the first couple minutes of what you said. They do the whole work and finish it like that and they're like – they take out their enrichment packets and work on that because you have to teach the other kids because they don't get it (M. Luna, Grade 4, February 6, 2015).

Considering how high achieving students are affected by pacing, participants in the study do not believe the amount of time required to prepare for and administer standardized tests helps students actually achieve. Instead, participants believe the time would be better spent challenging students in the classroom with rigorous, student centered lessons that motivate high achieving students. As H. Rodgers, a fourth grade teacher explains:

If I had all that time in my life back, my God. The lessons I could have created and the energy I could put back into my classroom for higher kids. I already know what we need to do. I just need to have the opportunity to do it and all this is, this testing, is somewhat meaningless for the most part. Especially for the higher kids I have (H. Rodgers, Grade 4, February 6, 2015).
One of the most contentious points that arose across grade levels was the loss of teacher oversight with regard to curriculum delivery. Regarding their insight to supplementing curriculum for high achieving students, teachers were concerned about being able to use their professional abilities to decide when and where to supplement prescribed curriculum. In this study, some teachers who feel they were able to “reach” students consider the expectations of the pacing guide to override their professional judgment. “You want to add fun things in but you feel pressured because there is not time” (S. Taylor, Grade 4, February 6, 2015). “Fun things” include project based learning, a concept that most teachers feel is lost due to the culture of testing. “Project-based learning is getting lost and that's the best learning because, they move on through the grade levels and they'll remember that, because they were fun ‘cause the kids related” (G. Pearson, Grade 4, February 6, 2015). “You were able to do projects that were so beneficial to their learning” (S. Garner, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

In essence, teachers felt their professional obligations have been influenced through industry expectations to shift from student interest, to scoring goal on standardized tests. As illustrated by A. Hamilton, a fifth grade teacher, this interpretation can be very frustrating, consequently affecting not only their instruction, but student learning as well. They assert:

It's a shame because the kids that, you know, your class you find they're really interested in something and you want to, maybe, extend it and you can't. Like, it would be like an hour and that's it, but it's hard to find that time to extend the project (A. Hamilton, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

According to participants in this study, pacing of the curriculum in order to cover subject matter anticipated to be on statewide standardized tests not only affects their instruction, but their abilities to connect with their students on a more personalized level. A number of participants
across the grade levels indicated the standardized test culture seems to run counter to their student centered approach to children and education. To them, pacing involves covering material for the sake of quantity, often at the sacrifice of quality. The accelerated pace of mandated curriculum creates a need to determine whether or not students are "understanding" material they are being exposed to. Not only is this process time consuming, it also creates the need for a large amount of data collection. This data collection becomes data points in the form of numbers. It is this concept that students are numbers that permeates throughout focus group conversations. H. Rogers provides a narrative summary of views expressed throughout the grade level focus groups:

If we took time, and, and had, like, if you built it every week, the time to sit down with every student for, at least say, five to ten minutes, and whether it's working on a writing piece or reading, and that was built into our weekly schedule. We would get to know our kids ten times as much, too, and, really, I'm going to be able to think why I may even help them out with, like, their personal stuff at home that might be holding them back in every other area and, and, none of that because it's all about these, like, factory kind-of numbers that are, that are meaningless (H. Rodgers, Grade 4, February 6, 2015).

Considering the fluid nature of instruction in the classroom and the frenetic pace imposed upon them, one of the most passionate arguments made by participants in all grade levels revolved around the level of mastery students attained at each grade level. Participants repeatedly conclude this pace, combined with what is described as a scripted program, result in little to no authentic, enduring learning for students.

And I think some of these kids we are told that they don't have to master, you know, don't worry if your whole class doesn't master this math concept, so keep going, keep going.
They'll get it eventually, but, I think in the olden days we could teach in different ways and someone would, they would, we would make sure that they all get it (M. Carter, Grade 4, February 6, 2015).

Teachers in the study are in agreement that students need some sort of measurement for evaluation, pointing out assessments should be formative and diagnostic, not summative. In their opinion, statewide standardized tests have become the antithesis of what "good teaching" should include, due to their high stakes, non-individualized testing methods. Inability to adjust the speed of instruction, lack of mastery of material, and lack of teacher oversight of the curriculum leads participants to describe what they call less than optimal classroom instruction and student learning. Alone, each of these conditions could be viewed as detrimental to the instruction of high achieving students, yet when combined their effect is to remove individualism of students, for what teachers describe as an education for the masses.

**Standardization of students has occurred due to testing.** A vast majority of teachers interviewed expressed the belief that standardization of students due to testing was occurring within the realm of education today. As such, a great number teachers participating in this focus group viewed this standardization as a threat to high achieving students' educational individualism in the classroom. When asked to reflect on their beliefs behind the reasons for standardized tests, not one participant responded “to increase student understanding.” Instead, the number one reason given for the purpose of standardized testing was accountability, and the ability to measure students, teachers, and schools more easily. “What does it really measure? Like what (participant) already said, it’s the business coming down. It is. It is a business model. But we're not dealing with, with products. We're dealing with people!” (F. Maldonado, Grade 3,
February 3, 2015) is a common response when trying to justify the overall efforts and resources expended in lieu of additional instructional time in the classroom.

Participants explained that the phenomena of equating students to numbers and the resultant accountability contribute to the culture of testing and how it influences the taught curriculum. When asked to expand upon their interpretations of what influences that “all important” curriculum, an emotional response given by E. Powell sums up the sentiments of not only the 5th grade participants, but those in 3rd and 4th grade as well:

Tests drive it. They depersonalize it. It all depersonalizes and it's all connected and it drives it. I feel like at times it, it, it, it so camouflages what's really important and it, it narrows our perspective on the child into this box rather than being able to validate how they've grown in other ways or how they've just simply grown. It devalues what we see in the classroom and what we celebrate, um, because it's narrowed down to a number, a data point (E. Powell, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

Those students that are high achieving are not always easy to narrow down to a data point, especially when they achieve a high score on a baseline test. “So he's a 99 (percentile on the baseline) to 96 (on the progress monitor) and he's failing right now” (E. Powell, Grade 5, February 5, 2015). As a number, this student’s subsequent score indicated they were at a failing level, however, when one takes into consideration the actual person and not the score, a different picture is painted. “In 5th grade his grade level was 12.9 equivalent or whatever, like, the highest it can go, so how is he gonna go any higher? You know?” (E. Powell, 2015).

“Accountability is trying to turn students and teachers into a mathematical problem rather than an art form” (E. Wolfe, Grade 4, February 6, 2015). The perception that students are being turned into "numbers" is not unique to one person, or one grade level involved in this study.
Individuals throughout the focus groups voiced concern that standardized testing is impacting teaching as an art form, with many feeling this is especially detrimental to those students that are high achieving. High achieving students who are prepared for extended learning seem to be placed at a disadvantage, due to the overall culture of accountability and testing and by what participants describe as the tendency to focus on Tier 2 and 3 students. As such, these extended learning opportunities are becoming more difficult for teachers in this study to provide for their high achieving students. As C. Gregory, a fifth grade teacher with a core group of high students explains:

For us to keep that love of learning, we have given up more and more, and I say that, not because it's hard necessarily, but it is hard sometimes. We have given up more of our own time to provide these extension activities for the kids who are looking for more. So we have kids with us at recess time or lunch times that we, you know try to enrich their learning. We have to have kids with us all the time (C. Gregory, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

Participants point out there is a core reading and a core math program, and the expectations of the district are that teachers will use uniform lessons and resources in order to allow for accurate student comparisons. In essence, there is an assessed curriculum that must be taught, in addition to the written curriculum.

Participants in this study feel the influence of the "assessed" curriculum, the inflexible pace of instruction, and the requisite collection of what is felt to be “massive” amounts of data actually act to the detriment of high achieving students. Without the ability to allow students to explore relevant topics or projects, or the ability to extend learning opportunities due to adherence to pacing guides, participants in the study question whether or not high achieving
students are benefiting from the way standardized testing influences instruction in the classroom. As S. Long summarizes:

I think the big irony here is that these standardized tests and all this new curriculum is designed to make them smarter and have their own rigor and a deep understanding that they piled so much on top of it and so much analysis of data and recording of data and testing and reviewing and testing again, that the rigor and the learning has, has gotten wildly superficial, in my opinion (S. Long, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

Standardized testing and the “new” curriculum resulting from it has impacted the way teachers in this study instruct their students, as well as changing the way students learn. Not long ago, teachers were able to seize upon students’ interests and formulate lessons and units that were creative and motivational. Individual teachers could plan lessons that played off the strengths of students, all the while overcoming their weaknesses. Instead, teachers have lost the ability to create unique, individualized lessons. As a case in point, E. Powell notes;

And so what's happening in our public schools seems like is it's devaluing what, the creativity that each teacher brings and celebrating that and letting that enhance the entire body; instead, it's saying those things aren't important and we all need look alike, the scripted, like, look at our, our, our writing and our math could easily be called a scripted program (E. Powell, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

That perceived scripting of programs is noted by other participants as well. Scripted programs require teachers to work in lockstep fashion to ensure common experiences for students regardless of their assigned classroom. Although this may provide an easier way to analyze student test results from teacher to teacher, negative perceptions of this uniformity pass
from the teacher to the student. This point was not lost on A. Hamilton, a grade 5 participant who has witnessed the shift in dynamics first hand:

I mean, and I think of writing, too, like if you were to go around and do a study of, like, of this group, the way that, like go into Holland's room, go into McKenzie's room, go all around and see, like the fantastic writing teachers that we all used to be! It was so good (for my high kids). And now, everyone’s been brought down because it's homogenized and that's a direct, to me, a direct result of testing (A. Hamilton, 2015).

Standardization of students was viewed by a great number of teachers as contrary to good, student centered instruction. Even as focus groups were conducted in closed rooms without the presence of administration, one group looked around before they spoke for effect. As they did, one member of the group stated they could not help but feel that the standardization of the curriculum; and consequently standardization of students; was promoted by school administration embracing the data driven decision making model. This response elicited many affirmations of this interpretation. Relying solely on numbers for data allows school administrators to quickly see which teacher’s students are not performing as well as others. Although administration conceivably looks at the students and not the teachers, teachers voice that they cannot help but feel as if they are being judged as well. This feeling of being judged lends itself to a bevy of issues related to the perception of trust:

I think we're in a catch-22 because it all comes down to a trust issue, I think. I think every single one of us in here and at every grade level knows how to teach to kids that are high, yet we’re being forced to do it in a certain way” (G. Pearon, Grade 4, February 6, 2015).
This trust issue affects more than just “being forced” to give up their discretion as teachers and instruct a certain way by those who, as participants describe, are not directly involved in education or the classroom. Whether it be the collective expectation of society for higher accountability or not, what is perceived as a trust issue by some participants translates into even less time available for high achieving students to have teacher time. As J. Bailey summarizes many participants’ reflections:

Yeah, well, we're being forced to be trained to be able to do this and it's time out of the classroom, so that's more time when we're not extending our kids' learning, you know, whereas, just trusting the fact that we know what we're doing and just let us do it without a scripted program, without being pulled out for special training, for lesson studies, or whatever. I really think that … It comes down to trust (J. Bailey, Grade 4, February 6, 2015).

Accountability continues to be a common theme throughout the discussions regarding standardization. Although third grade uses a varied form of terminology, the overall perception regarding administration’s ability to trust teachers is the same. As one third grade teacher notes, “I don't want to say micromanaging, but kind of having their thumb on, like, coming into the classroom, seeing the learning, it's kind of like their way of micromanaging what's happening” (F. Maldonado, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

Underlying reasons for accountability vary from teacher to teacher, with a significant number concluding it perpetuates a system of comparison between teachers. As one participant from the fourth grade focus group purposefully emphasized:

I think it's more accountability. That's the only reason because they wanted them tracked and see how well a school is performing, um, as opposed to anything that's been really
helpful. It’s state-versus-state, which state is high, more high academics than in a, in some foreign country. Which country? Japan, apparently, is better. You know what I mean? And then, and then it keeps going smaller, smaller, smaller; then, school within the state, which school is better and, and then which teachers are better than which (E. Wolfe, Grade 4, February 4, 2015).

Participant views reflect that although some levels of accountability may not necessarily be bad, it becomes detrimental to students when it becomes the driving force of education. This aspect of accountability is viewed as especially disadvantageous to high achieving students when it impacts the number of subjects being taught.

*Narrowing of the curriculum negatively impacts science and social studies.* When directly asked if there was an emphasis on one subject over the other at the school, the answer was a resounding a "yes." To illustrate this point, O. McKenzie of fifth grade posits, “These tests, they drive the curriculum we teach. They depersonalize it and drive it” (O. McKenzie, Grade 5, February 5, 2015). Although there is a written curriculum for subjects such as science and social studies, the taught curriculum falls short of what is required for high achieving students. S. Gordon of third grade explains, "it's focusing on, really, just math and reading because of the accountability aspect of standardized tests" (S. Gordon, grade 3, February 3, 2015). The frustration of the topic was obvious during focus group conversations, and was reiterated throughout the grade levels. In grade 4, participants had no qualms discussing their own perceptions as to the reasoning behind narrowing. Harkening back to pacing, B. Reeves suggests, “if it's not tested, it's not taken as seriously because it's, you know, it's, it's deemed not as important by somebody because it's not being tested, so we have to spend less time doing it” (B. Reeves, Grade 4, February 6, 2015). Grade 5 teachers go even further, providing additional
perceptions as to why science and social studies are diminished, “Like we have literally less time is in our schedule, um, which our schedule is determined by administration on how much we teach each subject” (S. Long, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

Teachers affirmed the importance of math and reading to high achieving students, but were also quick to argue that high achieving students have a need for science and social studies in order to become more well-rounded students. According to participants, hands-on experiences are valued by both teachers and students alike. Not only is the material more interesting to students when they are actively involved in meaningful activities, participants believe hands-on activities promote the higher level thinking skills necessary for high achieving students to be engaged in learning. Unfortunately, these experiences are becoming marginalized and narrowed in the name of covering tested subjects. W. Ball explains the excitement of students when math lessons are completed, allowing for content area subjects to be pursued:

There are days when my kids go, "Yay, we're having science today", like, they're so excited to have something hands-on, or, that they can do, and, you know, instead of me saying, well, we didn't get math finished yesterday so it's going to come out of this (W. Ball, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

However, as O. McKenzie explains, these activities are often at the mercy of the pacing guide in order to cover tested subject matter. When asked specifically how standardized tests narrow the curriculum;

It's impacting the instruction because in social studies I used to do more project-based learning. I used to do more group activities. So, it's not just about the content that the kids are missing as far as the material goes, but just the enriching experiences that really
require a lot of higher level thinking, a lot of group problem-solving. A lot of collaborative work (O. McKenzie, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

Listening to participants tell their stories, these higher level thinking experiences do occur, but they are infrequent and hurried at best. Although teachers attempt to cover science and social studies concepts through language arts lessons, this method does not lend itself to hands-on experiences. The drawback of this is summarized by S. Gordon, a third grade teacher who reflects on experiences with their class this year,

I think for some of the higher level kids that could potentially have a really strong love for science… or they could be that person that really becomes that future historian of the world, they’re not getting regular, consistent access to that (S. Gordon, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

Participants discussed the idea of narrowing and its impact on their instruction and student learning for some time. In this discussion, participants reflected on the use of visiting artists to supplement science lessons in this and previous years. In this manner, artists who are recognized as “artists in residence” by the state of Connecticut HOT (Higher Order Thinking) Schools program spend a series of weeks working with grade level teachers. However, even with this additional input, teachers considered the rigor of the science units they were using;

I think our emphasis is on the essentials. I found, like, thank goodness, we have the arts coming in and, you know, supplementing our science, you know, this year, but, um, I feel like we kind of dumbed down science and social studies and projects a little bit because of the emphasis on reading and math and all the other things we do here. Science is, what half an hour a day, or content is a half an-hour a day? Or once a week? (T. Owen, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).
Teacher descriptions indicate a growing frustration with the lack of time being devoted to non-tested subjects. According to a number of teachers across the grade levels, non-tested subjects are consistently sacrificed in the name of providing more time for reading and math. Participants expressed concern that high achieving students are losing interest in science and social studies due to the lack of devoting instructional time to these areas. “Townsend and I used to do social studies at least four times a week, forty-five minutes each day, and now we do it maybe twice a week, plus our time’s been cut in half. Add science to that, too” (O. McKenzie, Grade 5, February 5, 2015). Worse, some study participants find frustration with some suggestions for creating more time to teach content area information.

You know, the administrator is already saying, ‘you can, you know, we're doing science and social studies during your reading,’ it's, like, but that's not it! You're missing a whole component of an active mind! Content to be in reading, that's not what science really is, all, you know it's not just reading about science. Part of it’s science experiments and doing actual hands-on things! (W. Ferguson, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

For all the benefits of increased class time devoted to reading and math, a collective sigh of relief can almost be heard when discussing life in the classroom after testing is over in May. Although school based standardized tests such as universal screens and progress monitors are still being given, teachers feel as if a great curricular weight has been lifted from them. As A. Hamilton confesses;

In science I would take probably an extra day to do an experiment and then extend the deep extensions from that. I would do a research project which would really benefit those high kids to really get them to look into things they really wanted to investigate and then present. And I ended up, you know, kind of pushing that through the end of the year
as like an extra thing at the end of the year if we have time – Because the tests are over
(A. Hamilton, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

In conversation, many teachers expressed relief at the prospect of completing Smarter Balanced tests, enabling them to pursue and engage in activities that were not primarily assessment driven. Even upon completion of the Smarter Balanced test, however, teachers are not free from the obligations of testing. Although state-wide standardized tests are over at the end of May, teachers are still required to administer end-of-year assessments in order to determine student growth and achievement levels. Results from these tests affect yearly evaluation results, as students’ scores are used to determine Student Learning Objects (SLO), and Indicators of Academic Growth Development (IAGD). It is these indicators derived from standardized assessments that teachers feel drive the curriculum, “And when it's tied to our evaluation, that's when it's, it becomes skewed as far as its value for the students and how it drives our instruction” (C. Gregory, Grade 5, February 5, 2015). Invariably, Student Learning Objectives and Indicators of Academic Growth Development revolve around the tested subjects of reading and math, further emphasizing narrowing of the curriculum especially when many participants’ SLOs do not tend to emphasize high-achieving students. Yet, with the pressure of the Smarter Balanced exam alleviated, teachers look forward to being able to pursue lessons they feel may be more engaging to high achieving students by focusing more on science and social studies.

*High achieving students are expected to perform independently.* In the view of many participants, one of the characteristics that makes a student high achieving is their ability to complete work independently and accurately while teachers work with students who struggle with concepts. Participants may not entirely agree on whether all high achieving students do
well on exams or are able to sustain independence within the classroom, but most concur on the inner drive required of each student is considered above average. Numerous members of each focus group agreed that intrinsic motivation to succeed in school is very evident with many high-achieving students, if they are given the opportunities to expand their understandings. As third grade teacher T. Owen applies reflections of their own child’s high achieving behaviors to their own students’ experiences:

They have that inner drive. They want to be the best that they can be and, I mean, I see it with my own kid - they are pushin' and pushin' and pushin' because they want that 4.0. Well, that came from inside. I never said to them, you know, to do that. I think, maybe, there are some parents, but I know with me, I never stress that they had to be perfect and had to get straight A’s and to, you know? That came from within them (T. Owen, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

Many high achieving students are expected to work independently and adhere to teacher expectations on their own. According to participants in the study, independent studies and book clubs are often the method teachers use as a means to reach high achieving students. This independence, though, comes with a price. As M. Luna explains the necessity of this type of instruction in the classroom:

That's reality, now, unfortunately. So those kids, those high-achieving kids, you can give independent studies to. You can work with them in a book club, a high-level book club, but you're not – They're not getting the same direct instruction that the other kids are. Not as much (M. Luna, Grade 4, February 6, 2015).

For all intents and purposes, students who are high achieving are being given opportunities to pursue their own learning through independent studies, but with little direct
teacher interaction to guide the way. Although they have skills that allow them certain successes in the classroom, high achieving students are not always able to self-differentiate and deepen their learning during independent work as much as they would with direct teacher interaction and guidance. As C. Gregory clarifies:

Those high kids, those highest kids, it's a lot of, it's a lot of self-directed, you know, they're, when they're doing the book clubs and then there are challenges when they're reading three, four books at a time in small groups and, but it's never with me because, my lowest Tier 1 kids or my Tier 2 kids are reading with me every single day. Those (higher) kids aren't getting that teacher time (C. Gregory, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

That lack of teacher time also translates to less than optimal differentiation on the part of high achieving students. According to participants in the study, differentiation varies from class to class, but most revolve around some sort of independent work. Many times, independent work comes in the form of a packet, sometimes done in partnership with other high achieving students. In this manner, students are expected to rely on one another to provide support in order to solve problems or complete the packet with little to no teacher oversight. Interestingly, one participant in particular drew a comparison between differentiation and differentiated instruction. This distinction illustrated the dichotomy between what is expected from teachers, and what actually occurs. To illustrate, S. Holland discusses:

To differentiate I just give a packet of something that we've already done and say, "You guys go there", but if I wanted to do differentiated instruction it would be you – and your peers and I'd sit you down. Do I, okay, we're going take it, what they just did, and we're going to another step higher? Hardly ever. I think we used to have more time to, to really work with those kids that are higher-achieving. But not anymore because of the diversity...
of our groups now and the attention that the others need (S. Holland, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

Packets and book clubs aside, many high achieving students seem to yearn for teacher interaction time in order to expand not only their learning, but their emotional connection to school as well. Although they are considered by participants to be high achieving, they still have needs that necessitate the attention of the teacher in the room. High achieving students in participants’ classrooms not only need academic guidance, descriptions teachers provide indicate they may need social and emotional support as well:

I have kind of a flipside (to independence). I have a core group of Tier 1 students who, really, can make it difficult sometimes to give this support to, uh, my special ed. students and my Tier 3 students because they are, they're very demanding. They really want your time and attention (S. Garner, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

Even with demand for attention, higher achieving students are often tasked with driving their own learning through independent studies, especially in math. As A. Hamilton describes, “I have a lot of independent studies, especially in math, so they indicate what they are interested in, or explain what concepts they did not understand from STAR math tests” (A. Hamilton, Grade 5, February 5, 2015). From there, the process of independent learning begins, often supplemented by the use of technology. “I'll get on Khan Academy, find some videos and they, kind of, teach themselves, or work in a small group learning about it on their own and then just come check in with me but they're more self-directed” (A. Hamilton, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

Many participants view this emergence of technology in the classroom as a means to teach high achieving students during times they are committed to instructing others. In order for this model to be successful, students must be self-sufficient, responsible, and determined. The
teachers must also be able to use technology effectively and efficiently in order to ensure students are engaged in academically rigorous instruction, along with having adequate resources to devote to their students.

**Technology has served as a replacement for instruction.** In 2006, the research site was opened as a renovated school, complete with a SmartBoard and 3 student computers in each classroom. Over the years, technology has been slow to be upgraded and replaced. However, during the 2014-2015 school year, a select number of teachers at the research site piloted iPads in their classrooms. Those who did received up to 3 iPads for students, plus one teacher iPad connected to an Apple TV. In addition to three student computers in each classroom, teachers now have the ability to allow students to use apps and the Internet to help guide their learning. Although not directly involved with the teacher, high achieving students are able to do digital research, then proceed with seatwork designed to expand their learning. As E. Powell explains small group instruction for their highest students:

> What they're doing right now is an extension of what they, um, did on the computer with Khan Academy so, then there were some, like, printed activity sheets that they could take back to their seats and so they did the learning on their iPads or on their computers then they did the practice at their seats (E. Powell, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

Participants see this availability of technology to be a critical component of their daily instruction for high achieving students. However, the purpose of technology may be lost on the most easily influenced stakeholder in the process – the students themselves. This case is illustrated by the description of one high achieving student’s reaction to perceptions regarding the purpose of technology in the classroom:
I actually had a student break down the other day. He was so, um, he was like one of my high-level students who was like just tearing up in the hallways because he hears that CLIMB (school enrichment program) was no longer around and he thought that iPads were replacing CLIMB. I said no, no that's not true. Most classes do not have these. This is not replacement for CLIMB, we just don't have that anymore (C. Gregory, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

However, in the minds of many teachers in the focus group, technology has replaced the enrichment teacher. Due to the lack of an enrichment teacher to service high achieving students, classroom teachers rely on technology to supplement instruction in order to meet educational needs. Yet, even with questions focused on high-achieving students, one individual referenced how those high students can help to teach lower ones with the use of classroom technology, as if they were trying to justify why they are not providing the same amount of teacher to student time:

For math, some of us have iPads in their classroom and I know that my kids are, uh, using those to explain how they solve problems in a more in-depth way, making, uh, recordings of how they do it and, how, how they're solving it which is, um, uh, which works for them pretty well and you can also use them as, as, uh, students who can go ahead and help others, you know, because helping others reinforces your own knowledge (R. Todd, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

This topic, however, drew participants into somber, reflective conversation. One teacher, who happens to have school aged children considered high achieving, reflected on their own children’s experiences through a combination of teacher and parent lenses. With further probing, this individual expressed frustration and animosity toward technology in the classroom with
animation and obvious agitation. Observably anguished, this experienced teacher asked for permission to respond as a parent. Allowing them the freedom to speak, they recounted their story:

So, as a parent, I ask my son what did you do today and on the standardized test scores, he's doing fairly well, and so I'd say, ‘What did you do today?’ You know, ‘Did you work with your teacher in a small group?’ He's in second grade. ‘No, no. I was on the computer. I was on the computer every day for math for reading in the small groups.’ He's always on the computer and so the computer has replaced his teacher and I said ‘Oh, well, did you, you know, did you do small group?’ ‘No, not today. No, she met with, you know, X, Y and Z groups but she didn't meet with my group today.’ And that's what happens every day, so it think that sometimes for our higher-achieving students we feel like they're doing okay, they're doing fine and so, they're, kind of, they have a computer babysitter (E. Powell, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

**Research question 2.** What are teacher perceptions regarding the level of rigor in the classroom for high achieving students as a result of the increased significance of standardized testing?

Similar to responses to Research Question 1, themes related to Research Question 2 were gathered through the use of focus group interviews with classroom teachers, along with document analysis. Themes related to Research Question 2 are indicated in Table 3.

| Rigor has become superficial due to the culture of testing |
| Lack of rigor results in issues of motivation related to frustration/tedium |
| Bowing of the curriculum to testing decreases rigor for high achieving students |
Themes in relation to the question: What are teacher perceptions regarding the level of rigor in the classroom for high achieving students as a result of the increased significance to standardized testing?

**Rigor has become superficial due to the culture of testing.** Exploring the concept of rigor with participants resulted in both body language that expressed antipathy, and responses that expressed annoyance at the term. “Rigor. Yeah. I love that word.”

“The new buzz word. It used to be differentiation, now it's rigor.”

“I'm sorry, I had to use the R word but, you know, it was in the question, so –“

“I get to sing that word in my song. My hard work and my rigor.”

The above exchange between three seasoned teachers in the fifth grade focus group reflects the group’s disdain for the “concept” of rigor, as it is interpreted by participants. To echo S. Long’s words regarding rigor from thoughts presented in the standardization of students section, participants feel the rigor has become “wildly superficial” (S. Long, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

This description of superficiality is further discussed and explained by others throughout the focus groups. Within these discussions, some participants indicated that the challenge level of the class has been rising due to testing and its requirements, making it even more necessary to intervene on behalf of “lower” students. This challenge for lower students then requires more commitment of time and resources, further depleting potential resources for higher achieving students. “We've challenged everyone else so much that they need so much more assistance and so much help to get to that level” (E. Powell, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

Delving deeper into participants’ views on rigor is third grade teacher W. Ball’s commentary regarding what has become common practice with classroom instruction.
Remarking on the tested subjects of math and reading, Ball focuses their comments on how instruction has changed in regard to rigor in the third grade classroom, albeit at the expense of practice:

I think the rigor is, is there, I, think, you know, like, with the, with the math, it's definitely more rigorous; much more language-based, um, but even some of the reading, what they're expected to do, how they're expected to think about what they're reading; some of the strategies, and all. I think that, I think it definitely has supported rigor. I just am not sure that it, um, has been done in a way that was good teaching practice, I guess (W. Ball, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

Ball’s description of rigor, that of more language based instructional activities and application of strategies, reflects the comments expressed by a number of participants in the study. What may be good teaching practice seems to have evolved over the experience years of teachers in the focus groups. Driven by standardized testing, what is considered “good teaching” now may not have been in the past:

Well, I'd say in reading I can think of a change. The shift suddenly went to having two texts and reading two texts and doing something in two texts or writing something that connects to both and, and highlighting. I mean, like, I've done more of gathering, watching a video and reading the text and that, that didn't exist before the Smarter Balanced test (N. Townsend, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

Although comparing two texts, highlighting, and watching videos may be acceptable ways to gather information, they do not fulfill the currently accepted definitions of rigor. During focus groups, there was a distinct difference between teachers who have less than 8 years in the profession, and those who are more tenured. To teachers in the study just entering the
profession, rigor is most often interpreted as being able to acquire the skills necessary to decode the test and answer the requisite questions properly. To teachers in the study nearing the end of their careers, rigor can be described primarily as instruction that encourages students to think creatively and deeply about subjects and issues that matter to them, and to challenge their assumptions.

Showing the importance of true rigor to participants, this discussion topic elicited emotional responses from some of the teachers. Many times these responses began with expressions of anger and frustration, evolving into acrimony and disgust. As F. Maldonado struggles for words, they describe how instruction for high achieving students has changed since the perceived importance of standardized testing has grown:

There was an art to teaching. There. Was. An. Art. To. Teaching. There was teaching to foster learning and the love of learning and to be learners, not to – respond – to the scripted test. Not to learn how to answer a question in this particular form, not to… it just, it breaks my heart to see that this is what education has become and as a person who's been in this, field for a very long time, this is not the field that it was. It's become a totally different profession (F. Maldonado, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

As participants discussed rigor, references to the use of technology in the classroom reemerged. Upon this, one individual became more and more agitated with the conversation, commenting on the apparent use of technology as a surrogate for instruction:

They have a different teacher, which is not a qualified teacher and so, that's, so I feel, like, in general, the level of rigor in our classrooms has increased, but not for all of our students, and I think that that's attributed to standardized tests (E. Powell, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).
Participants generally concur that instruction leading to Smarter Balanced tests will be more “challenging,” but not more rigorous. Testing is seen as potentially more challenging due to logistical issues, and “figuring out” technology. Rigor on the other hand, or the use of complex tasks to elicit deep, meaningful understandings that are intellectually challenging and stimulating, is not present.

As perceptions of rigor have changed, so have expectations in the classroom. “To compare a high-achieving now versus ten years ago and if we tell them to do the same thing, you know, they would have no idea how to approach it” (O. McKenzie, Grade 5, February 5, 2015). Many teachers feel that instead of preparing students for a love of lifelong learning and giving them the skills to figure things out on their own, they are now producing students who are supposed to follow a set pattern of rules in order to complete tasks similar to those on tests. According to participants, this sort of educational practice has greatly impacted their instruction and learning for high achieving students, but not in ways that support educational rigor. Quite the opposite, some teachers have found this new process to be detrimental to the overall goal of inspiring a love of learning. As a third grade teacher in the study describes:

The pace. The boom, boom, boom, here's the test date. I got to get this done. I think that sometimes that takes away from the academic rigor of it, but, yet at the same time, you want to remember these kids are eight, so you don't want them to feel like, well, I don't want to do math, I don't want to do reading and now I don't want to do science, because it’s always push push push– no enjoyment (M. Holt, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

General consensus dictates that enjoyment, that desire to learn about subjects in school, should lead to increased rigor by means of students’ individual choice and personal relevance. With participants who have been involved in teaching for a number of years, much of this
personal relevance, if not personal choice, was achievable through the use of project based learning which has become a thing of the past.

Participants surmise the skills that are being stressed in the classroom are not emphasizing the principles of project based learning, much to the detriment of development of high achieving students’ abilities. This sentiment echoes throughout the grade levels as participants continue to express frustration at what they feel is a curriculum that is designed to prepare for testing.

Well, some of the high-achieving students, like (B. Reeves) said, they get it – right away but, and then we're spending forty more minutes –because those other kids need to be able to do this on the test, you know, when SBAC comes, so you can't, and you're doing whole group instruction, so, so -- for the high-achieving kids because they've got it in the first ten minutes. And it's really – not as rigorous in that respect (G. Pearon, Grade 4, February 6, 2015).

When asked if the curriculum is rigorous in the face of standardized testing, an exchange between participants ensued that belied whatever enthusiasm they may have had for what has been described as “rigorous.” Not only have programs been compromised in their fidelity of implementation, the objective of instruction seems to be changing. As fourth grade teachers converse openly regarding their instruction and rigor for high achieving students, one participant emphatically replies, “But we're teaching to the test!” (M. Luna, Grade 4, February 6, 2015). Another, commenting on the program that was purchased by the district to guide their implementation of curriculum volunteered, “And when you change the program to…” (M. Carter, Grade 4, February 6, 2015), just before being interrupted by another teacher to interject the fact that not only is the program being changed, but “We’re changing our curriculum so it
matches the test” (J. Bailey, Grade 4, February 6, 2015). Finally, one participant volunteered a comment that drew nearly unanimous agreement from the rest of the focus group, “No. Sometimes you invalidate the curriculum because you, you have to change it” (I. Patterson, Grade 4, February 6, 2015).

**Lack of rigor results in issues of motivation related to frustration/tedium.** According to participants in the study, the general mood of the classroom can be described as being affected by the use of standardized tests. This has also influenced teacher perceptions of school culture and expectations. Preparing for testing is so entrenched in teachers’ thinking, one fourth grade participant raised the concern at a monthly Principal’s Advisory Committee meeting that “Using WOW for topics unrelated to instruction/teaching [i.e., staff research project]” (Internal communication, February 3, 2015) would negate the intentions of the meeting. Further questioning the use of before school meeting time usually dedicated to discussions of instructional practice, one teacher posed the question to administration, “Is this really the purpose of these meetings? We don’t want to set a precedent” (Internal communication, February 3, 2015). Despite their reluctance to divert from test related professional development held during WOW meetings, this teacher subsequently participated in the focus group interviews.

In order for teachers to prepare students to meet testing obligations, teachers at the study location indicate they are not only expected to tailor lessons toward tested subjects and material, they are required to instruct students in the logistical requirements of taking an online, standardized test. This requires more training for teachers, many times during the school day when instruction would normally occur. Adding to this, tedium from the sheer amount of what teachers describe as mundane training for students leads to frustration reaching peak levels up to the time tests are scheduled. As fourth grade teacher H. Rodgers explains with clear frustration:
They're tired of taking tests. They don't mind it, because they do well, but they're annoyed by it. Like, 'oh another test’ or, or they're annoyed that you're not in the classroom. ‘Oh, you're leaving again?’ You know, so, so they miss that instruction with you because there's always a sub because we're always gone, then if you are there, you're giving them a test and all they want to do is hands-on learning, so if you ever have to skip science, they're bummed, because they wanted to do an experiment, you know? (H. Rodgers, Grade 4, February 6, 2015).

Participants concur that hands-on activities are motivating to students and promote creativity that enhance higher order thinking skills. As they argue, higher order thinking skills are critical to the development of and continued education of high achieving students. These higher order thinking skills, although talked about and promoted as part of district discussions, are seldom emphasized or taught in the classroom. Due to the testing culture, teachers describe conditions where work is not meaningful, creative, or motivational to their high achieving students in grades three to five. This lack of motivation in turn leads to a lack of commitment to learning on the students’ part, due in many cases to a lack of relevancy. Lack of relevancy for students quickly turns to tedium. As fifth grade teacher E. Powell explains:

Kids are less motivated because, again, everything is rush, rush, let's get this done, move on, okay test tomorrow, boom, and even, you know, like you say, like the high-level kids, at least speaking in my room - I don't get really great work from them because – it wasn’t meaningful. I'll say to the kids well I know you had this last year and they look at you like they had absolutely no idea, and even something we did two weeks ago and they looked at you like they had no idea what you're talking about. It means nothing to them because it’s not even relevant to them (E. Powell, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).
Related to motivation and tedium in the classroom, narrowing of the curriculum does not only affect science and social studies, it influences tested subjects as well. Participants’ descriptions explain that high achieving students understand and retain material better when they are engaged in learning are in accord with each other. Projects and lessons are more meaningful to students when they involve hands-on experiences that not only appeal to them, but are relevant and rigorous as well. As the mood of respondents dictates, teachers regrettably describe situations where little or no time is dedicated to such activities for the sake of loading more and more test material into students. As third grade teacher W. Ferguson explains:

Even when we were going over the pacing guide for the math, when it comes down to fitting everything in, we noticed that the lessons that you remove are the lessons where the kids get to do some sort of hands-on activity with it, so it's, like -- if you can't fit all the stuff in you got to fit, take out the fun stuff — and do the other stuff, you know? And that's, that's what we're being told to do (W. Ferguson, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

Lack of hands-on and higher order thinking skill activities is taking a toll on the teachers as well. Time needed to “catch up” Tier 2 and 3 students, in addition to the expectation that high achieving students will perform, places teachers in the untenable situation of relying on students aged 8 to 12 in many cases to monitor their own learning and achievement. Situations such as this contribute to what teachers feel is an undue amount of pressure related to testing. This pressure, in turn, translates to the students in negative ways – ways that place more pressure and frustration on high achieving students to perform, and less emphasis on student centered learning. As I. Patterson matter-of-factly explains:

It's definitely more intense and it's more stressful, I think, for us and, therefore, the
students because it's a push-down effect. Your administration comes down on the teachers for deadlines and, and, test scores and everything else and so, you've got to, kind of, keep your kids rushed (I. Patterson, Grade 4, February 6, 2015).

Teachers in the group feel this push down effect does not only happen at school. The perceived importance of standardized testing has led many parents to place what many teachers feel is undue pressure to perform as well. Students, especially high achieving ones, now feel pressure to perform from both school and home:

You know the reason I brought up parents before is because that's the message that kids are getting at home, so then when the kids come and they go to take that test here, right away it takes some higher stakes because of the message they're receiving from home, so I think especially the higher achieving kids, they're internalizing that and they're feeling that from their parents (J. Bowman, Grade 5, February 5, 2015).

Frustration on the part of the students is evident for teachers in the study. Many teachers expressed an attitude of resignation when discussing the overall conditions in their classrooms. Teachers reflecting on their time in the classroom reminisce about enlivening lessons and capturing the imaginations of their students through the use of arts where ideas flowed freely. Now, when teachers in the study reflect on their classroom environments over the last few years, they describe situations where instruction is fast paced, prescribed, and stressful:

Students used to have fun coming to school and, you know, we, we don't have time. I think the arts are being forced upon whereas in the past, we didn't need to have resident artists come in to work with our kids. We were able to enrich their life (M. Carter, Grade 4, February 6, 2015).
Apart from exasperation over changing dynamics in classroom instruction for teachers, frustration levels are increasing for students as well. Third grade teachers describe situations where the classroom environment has changed so drastically for students entering the “testing year,” students are having difficulty finding encouragement to extend their learning past the basic expected requirements. Far from building a love of learning through student centered teaching, stress levels projected onto students have resulted not in more rigor, but a building disenchantment for education and a weariness for learning that is, at the very least, detrimental. This notion is supported by various participants in the study, but summarized by a third grade teacher, in particular:

I just want to say one thing about those high-achieving kids, I think, too, by the time they're done with the math, done with the reading that were required and the do; they're done. By the time they get home, or by the time that they're, they're finished with their day, they're done. They are, like, just so tired of school and academics and learning and I think that they need a break (T. Owen, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

With increased frustration and tedium related to classroom instruction, teachers are increasingly cognizant of students’ decreased levels of involvement, and commitment to excellence. While pointing out the emphasis testing has on their instruction, participants indicate they are losing their high achieving students to tedium. Lamenting the conditions, teachers are sympathetic to students’ recalcitrant attitudes toward school:

There’s only so much we can do, so much control we have over the situation. We’re just making this so - so much of a drudgery. With all the demands that those poor kids, who are those high achievers, even the lower, I think they are just so – Saturated. I think they're just done. You know? Even to say, ‘Oh, why don't you research that at home?’
You know? Or, ‘Why don't you, you go ahead and try and, you know…” but, they’re finished! (F. Maldonado, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

Regarding this discussion, one participant in particular was quiet throughout most of the focus group. Although they were an experienced teacher, they reserved their input for as long as they could, neither agreeing with, or contradicting their colleagues’ observations and comments. As the discussion unfolded before them, this participant increasingly shifted their body back and forth, belying their perceived disinterest in the topic. Finally, as if the weight of the discussion had compelled them to comment, they offered this final statement on teachers’ descriptions of their current classroom instruction:

We are still wondering if it's the true depth of their learning from us, just giving them this, as (F. Maldonado) said, drudgery....There is no depth to it. There's no true long lasting value. Are, are we fostering learners or are we just, you know, creating little robotic people who can take tests? (S. Garner, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

**Bowing of the curriculum decreases rigor for high achieving students.** The recommended and written curriculum, virtually one and the same, come directly from the Common Core State Standards. As viewed by teachers in the study group, this curriculum relates directly to the tested curriculum. However, when probed as to which is supported, participants clearly feel the curriculum has bowed to the requirements of standardized testing. The majority of participants, having taught for more than ten years (see table 1, p. 64), feel their professional acumen, insight, and opinions are disregarded by “the powers that be.” As fourth grade teacher M. Carter stipulates, “As far as curriculum, you'd have to ask the people that tell us what we're supposed to teach. It's just gets given to us and given to us” (M. Carter, Grade 4, February 6, 2015). This curriculum that is “given” is subject to constant change and revision.
Participants respond that even when the district purchases core programs that are supposed to meet standards, they often fall short in meeting the needs of their high achievers, greatly impacting teachers’ instruction. In order to meet the determinate needs of students in order to pass tests, teachers have rewritten whatever program the district has purchased (G. Pearon, Grade 4), “Or made” (I. Patterson, Grade 4).

Although teachers in the study are eager to provide their own input and tailor their own lessons to meet the needs of their high achieving students, they are in a constant state of flux regarding the regulatory requirements now present in education. E. Wolfe offers the following insight regarding the curriculum and its “relationship” with standardized tests and how instruction is constantly changing with regard to meeting the collective expectations of performing on state-wide standardized tests:

Yes, we’ve rewritten, or made major changes because we needed to match the test because whenever you sit in a meeting, like yesterday, all I hear is, ‘Well, on SBAC, they're going to have to do this,’ so that's why I put this in this lesson. ‘On SBAC, they're going to need to know how to do this,’ so this is why I put that in the lesson (E. Wolfe, Grade 4).

**Teachers parting reflections.** Out of the 27 teachers who took part in the focus groups, half of them have school aged children. In addition, many teachers within the district are residents in town as well. This dynamic gives these participants the unique perspective to see instruction and learning not only through the lens of an educator, but also as district parents. As discussions came to a conclusion, each group reflected on the day’s conversations, and how their instruction of high achieving students may change in the future. Although each grade level discussed renewing their focus on high achieving students, using hands-on, meaningful
experiences and student centered learning, teachers in the study reverted back to describing their current situations.

After listening to their colleagues describe the current state of affairs in schools, one third grade teacher in particular paused, looked around the room, and introspectively, quietly made the following statement:

As a, as a parent, I am so sad that this is what education has become for my son, as I am sure you are with your kids, I mean, it just, when I think what my older two, their experience, as opposed to his, I would go back to the way it was ten years ago, twelve years ago for them. They had a much better education than my younger kids are having (F. Maldonado, Grade 3, February 3, 2015).

Fourth grade teachers were nonplused when it came to final reflections. Whereas the third grade teacher spoke of their own children and their expectations and hopes for education, final words from the group came from a teacher focusing more on the instruction related to testing. Taken with the freedom to discuss in a closed, protected forum, one participant became rather outspoken with a more displeased tone:

When is someone gonna push back and say enough of this!? This is BS because it’s not helping. It’s hurting and it’s not necessarily accurate. Again, if some, if somebody has a poor day or, whatever, there it is. Boom. ‘Oh he, he didn't make his skilled score growth and that's a big problem. What are we going to do about it?’ It’s ridiculous (G. Pearson, Grade 4, February 6, 2015).

Fifth grade teacher O. McKenzie had the final word for the fifth grade group. Bringing the debate full circle, McKenzie’s reflection revolved around the big picture confronting
education and the capturing of students’ spirit. Almost cathartically, McKenzie’s choice of words summarized what undoubtedly drove conversations forward in each focus group:

You know what, too, (Researcher)? I feel like at this level, particularly, um, I just, I mean I want the kids to love school no matter what, you know, throughout the whole thing, but, honestly, when they get to middle school, socially, those things really just get so much thicker, but here we still have them, and what I feel bad about it, it had them the sense and they're almost in a sense and they love you and, you know, they're beautiful and I guess I just feel bad that so much of it now is, is taken out, that opportunity for them to love learning. That's what I feel like missing so much in my classroom; the, the opportunity to nurture that love for learning and what better thing for them to take into middle school and high school, but this love for learning? But, instead, it becomes so driven and fast-paced that, that's where my heart aches for the kids.

**Summary of Research Results**

Study findings presented in this chapter were determined solely from analysis of participant discussions, teacher observation, and document analysis. This analysis was conducted in order to answer the research questions: How do teachers in a suburban intermediate school in Connecticut describe the effect that state-wide standardized tests have had on teaching and learning practices for students who are considered high achieving?; and what are teacher perceptions regarding the level of rigor in the classroom for high achieving students as a result of the increased significance of standardized testing? In response to the research questions, participants describe conditions in which classroom instruction, student learning, and rigor for participants’ high achieving students are all affected, and are completely intertwined.
Findings of the study revealed 11 themes dealing with instruction, learning, and rigor. These themes related to time devoted to testing and practice, pacing, resources (devotion of resources to Tier 2 and 3; and lack of resources for high achieving students), narrowing of the curriculum, expectations of students, use of technology, frustration/tedium, standardization of students, “bowing” of the curriculum to testing, and rigor.

Findings reveal a group of teachers who are cognizant of the needs of high achieving students, but who are largely unable to provide adequate time and resources to them. This lack of providing resources does not stem from lack of desire, but from what participants describe as constraints placed on them by curricular responsibilities and demands. Beliefs are that these constraints and demands are largely due to standardized tests, and their resulting cultural influences.

Paramount among the themes teachers describe at this particular research site are conditions in which instruction and learning of high achieving students is not only influenced by state wide standardized testing, it is dictated by it. Although challenge; by way of increased difficulty and expectations; is present, rigor; described as the use of complex tasks to elicit deep, meaningful understandings that are intellectually challenging and stimulating; is not. Teachers at the research site describe conditions where their daily instruction is delivered with passing standardized tests in mind. Not only does instruction revolve around the accountability factor of universal screens, progress monitors, and end of year assessments, it is purposely designed and delivered in order to pass the state-wide standardized test, in this case, the Smarter Balanced test.

Chapter V: Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Introduction

Findings of this research were grounded in the conceptual Framework of Alignment presented by Abelmann and Elmore (2004). This framework served as a lens to better
understand this study’s particular problem of practice with regard to accountability, responsibility, and expectations. Using semi-structured focus group questions (see Appendix E) designed to produce thick descriptions, participants revealed beliefs that standardized tests do have an effect on teaching and learning practices of high achieving students in this particular research setting.

Standardized tests have become an integral part of school accountability as a way of ensuring regulatory compliance (Connecticut Department of Education, 2012), measuring academic progress (Gunzenhauser, 2003), and evaluating teachers and school districts (Burris & Welner, 2011; Connecticut Department of Education, 2012), standardized tests have become an integral part of school accountability. Due to the amount of pressure teachers, schools, and districts are under to perform, many standardized tests have been deemed “high-stakes” (Berliner, 2011; Duncan & Stevens, 2011; Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Kohn, 2000). With “high stakes” tied to standardized testing, schools often focus limited resources on filling gaps of understanding for students in order to increase the number of students who are considered proficient. As such, standardized testing has had a role in changing the focus of instruction in the classroom by encouraging teachers and schools to focus on academically challenged students in order to make them proficient on standardized tests, universal screens, and progress monitor tests.

This focus has changed the way teachers attend to the needs of other students without attending to the needs of high achieving students. This cumulative effect has resulted in high achieving students not receiving the instruction and resources they deserve (Azano, et al., 2011; Cross, 2007; Dimitriadis, 2012; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010) due to narrowing of the curriculum (Berliner, 2011; Burris & Welner, 2011; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Horn, 2003), and
a decrease of rigor in the classroom (Azano, Missett, Callahan, Oh, Brunner, Foster, & Moon, 2011; Cross, 2007; Dimitriadis, 2012; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010).

Although they may reach benchmarks more quickly and easily than others, high achieving students may not self-differentiate instruction, requiring the guidance and facilitation of teachers to challenge their abilities (Manning, Stanford, & Reeves, 2010). Without differentiated teacher interaction, high achieving students may then disengage from learning, thereby denying their potential (Manning, Stanford, & Reeves, 2010). Left unchallenged, high achieving students run the risk of “academic mediocrity” (Manning, Stanford & Reeves, 2010, p. 146), and threaten the “cognitive capitalism” (Rindermann & Thompson, 2011, p. 762) required for technological progress and development (p. 762).

While research has been compiled on the impacts of standardized test results (Anderman, Anderman, Yough, & Gimbert, 2010; Forte, 2010; Wiliam, 2010), this study sought to understand and examine how teachers describe the effects standardized tests have on their teaching and learning practices with high achieving students, along with implications of rigor for these students.

Research Questions

Since testing has resulted in pedagogical changes that favor tested subjects over other non-tested disciplines (Berliner, 2011), students who score well on tests are often not academically challenged in the classroom (Azano, et. al., 2011; Cross, 2007; Dimitriadis, 2012; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010). Two research questions were pursued in this study:

1. How do teachers in a suburban intermediate school in Connecticut describe the effect that state-wide standardized tests have had on teaching and learning practices for students who are considered high achieving?; and
2. What are teacher perceptions regarding the level of rigor in the classroom for high achieving students as a result of the increased significance of standardized testing guided the study.

Analysis of focus group interviews, documents, and teacher observation formed the basis of the study, and resulted in the overall findings.

Summary of the Findings

Findings of this general qualitative study were determined using coding and analysis of focus group interviews, document analysis, and observations of certified, self-contained classroom teachers. Participants in the study taught the content area subjects of reading and math at the upper elementary/intermediate level (grades 3-5) during the 2014-2015 school year in a small, suburban school in Connecticut.

Teachers participated in focus group interviews in February of 2015. Completing focus groups in February not only allowed teachers to provide descriptions of what instruction during the majority of the school year looked like, it also gave concrete portrayals of how their instruction and student learning were impacted by impending state-wide testing in April.

Descriptions closely aligned with Abelmann and Elmore’s (2004) Framework of Alignment tenets of accountability, expectations, and responsibility. Overall, participants felt accountability was the primary reason for standardized tests. Teachers revealed descriptions which held that regulatory requirements of standardized tests affected not only the curriculum they teach, but participants were in overwhelming agreement that standardized testing and its resulting culture have affected both their instruction and their high achieving students’ learning. Additionally, teachers in the study indicated an absence of rigor for their high achieving students.
Although classroom expectations vary from grade level to grade level and generally increase as students age, the themes that emerged all related to high achieving students in each grade level. As independence levels increased as students became older, teachers consistently described situations and scenarios where classroom instruction and learning was influenced, and sometimes outright shaped, by statewide standardized tests.

Upon commencement of focus group discussions in relation to the research questions, it became evident that classroom instruction and student learning were, in the view of participants, inextricable from rigor. Subsequently, a number of themes emerged which were intertwined throughout grade levels, and discussions. Analysis of focus group interviews, documents, and teacher observation supported this concept. Consequently, these themes evolved into the findings of the study.

![Theme Frequency Chart](image)

Figure 3: Theme Frequency Chart
Discussion of Findings

**Standardized tests drive the curriculum.** Participants in focus groups at each grade level indicated that standardized testing drives the curriculum, therefore, their instruction and student learning is affected. Participants indicated four major ways in which standardized tests affect the curriculum: excessive time dedicated to testing and preparation, pacing, narrowing of the curriculum, and motivation related to tedium/frustration.

**Excessive time dedicated to testing and test preparation.** All groups commented on the amount of time required in order to prepare for tests. Time required to prepare for tests included covering of tested material, as well as learning the test format, and utilizing practice tests in computer labs to ensure familiarity with the testing regimen. Although guidelines suggested a window of time that would be required for testing, participants indicated this anticipated commitment time was grossly underestimated. Amounting to what participants collectively estimate as hundreds of hours of instructional time, standardized testing had a significant impact on the amount of instruction in which they could provide deeper, richer learning to their high achieving students. Teachers in the study also expressed concern regarding their high achieving students and their academic well-being when confronted with computerized test practice and administration. In a number of cases, teachers felt their high achieving students were either already adept at skills needed to navigate the test process, or were apt to complete requirements more quickly and easily than others, leaving them with idle time. Consequently, teachers felt student levels of involvement and understanding were impacted, as well as the rate at which instruction occurred.

**Pacing speeds instruction and revolves around test preparation.** One of the most contentious themes to emerge from all grade levels was the pace at which instruction must occur.
Based in accountability, pacing also revolves around expectations – expectations to produce instruction that will result in higher test scores. Speaking with participants, there is a perception that teachers are being held to a certain standard – a standard established by society, and therefore the school district, to increase the quantity of material covered in the marking period. Due to the amount of material that must be covered to ensure students have had adequate exposure to possible subjects/concepts on standardized tests, teachers in the study indicate a hurried, frenetic pace that must be maintained throughout the school year.

Pacing is also responsible for the perpetuation of the climate of testing, one that places undue stresses on not only teachers, but high achieving students as well. As teachers continually “push” through lessons in order to meet the demand of pacing guides and test schedules, participants contend a lack of student mastery occurs, resulting in learning practices counter to higher level thinking skills or depth of knowledge. This heightened pace is predominantly described as affecting only the tested subjects of math and reading/language arts.

**Narrowing of the curriculum.** All three focus groups acknowledged an awareness of narrowing of the curriculum to emphasize the subjects of math and reading/language arts. As indicated previously by B. Reeves, “if it's not tested, it's not taken as seriously…” (B. Reeves, Grade 4, February 6, 2015). Each focus group also indicated that their classroom instruction, students’ learning and rigor were affected by narrowing.

Although participants were in agreement with the importance of math and reading to high achieving students, they also agree that more hands-on science and social studies are critical to the well-being and development of their high achievers. Teachers in each grade level described situations in which students were more engaged in their learning when instruction was combined with meaningful activities relatable to them. Additionally, participants also expressed the firm
belief that hands-on activities promote creativity and motivation, as well as higher level thinking skills.

Due to what participants describe as standardized tests driving the curriculum, these higher level thinking experiences occur only sporadically and are often hurried at best. Although teachers attempt to cover science and social studies concepts through language arts lessons, this method does not lend itself to hands-on experiences.

Teacher descriptions clearly indicate a growing frustration with the amount of time, or lack thereof, being devoted to non-tested subjects. Related to instruction, a nearly unanimous number of teachers across the grade levels indicate non-tested subjects are consistently sacrificed in the name of providing more time for reading and math. Related to student learning, participants expressed concern that high achieving students are losing interest in science and social studies due to the lack of instructional time devoted to these areas.

Furthering narrowing of the curriculum, teachers express concern that Student Learning Objectives and Indicators of Academic Growth Development revolve around the tested subjects of reading and math, decreasing emphasis on non-tested subjects. Few participants indicate their SLOs emphasize high-achieving students, or their needs in the classroom.

Motivation related to tedium and frustration. Study participants agree that higher order thinking skills are critical to the development and continued education of high achieving students. These higher order thinking skills, although described as being promoted within district discussions, are seldom taught in classrooms due to narrowing and pacing. Consequently, teachers describe conditions where work is not meaningful, creative, or motivational to their high achieving students. Teachers in each of the grade levels cite this lack of motivation as a reason students show decreased commitment to learning due to a reduction in
relevancy. Consequently, teachers claim scarcity of relevancy for students quickly turns to tedium.

Furthermore, although teachers say they experience stressors related to narrowing and pacing, they are quick to point out their greatest frustrations and tedium are not because of the test itself, but because they feel students; especially their high achieving ones; are experiencing a loss of love for learning. While pointing out the emphasis testing has on their instruction, participants indicate they are losing their high achieving students to tedium.

**High achieving students do not have equitable teacher time or resources.** A number of findings evolved from the theme of equity tied to teacher time, and resources due to standardized tests. Among themes determining this finding are descriptions of greater resources devoted to Tier 2 and 3, a lack of resources and time devoted to high achieving students, the expected independence of high achieving students, and technology as a replacement for instruction.

**Resources devoted to Tier 2 and 3.** Indicative of classroom instruction, even when specifically discussing high achieving students, teachers in the focus group interviews continually relapsed to discussions regarding students not fitting the study demographic. In general, participants estimated as high as 90 percent of their daily instruction revolved around Tier 2 and 3 students. Reasons for such a high concentration of instruction for Tier 2 and 3 ranged from perceptions that high achieving students were more able to self-organize, self-monitor, and self-differentiate, to being expected to “catch others up” due to accountability requirements. In some cases, high achieving students are used as peer tutors with students who struggle, a practice that is viewed by a small number of participants as beneficial to both the high achiever, and the recipient.
Lack of resources devoted to high achieving students. While recognizing the need to service all students in their classrooms, teachers in the study estimate only 10 percent of their classroom instruction time and resources are spent directly on or with their high achieving students. Out of the time spent with high achieving students, lessons are hurried and lack depth, what one teacher previously referred to as “hit-and-run type of instructional design” (I. Patterson, Grade 4). Teachers are left to creatively fill the needs of high achieving students by the use of parent volunteers, book clubs, independent packets, and the use of technology. A mixture of teachers who both supported the notion that high achieving students did not require extra teacher time and resources, and those who believed all students deserved equitable time existed in the study. Additionally, some teachers felt that high achieving students’ needs were being met by having them instruct and guide students with less understanding through processes and activities.

Instruction of high achieving students depends on expected independence. Most participants in the study groups consider inner drive, or intrinsic motivation on the part of the student, as necessary to meet the criteria to be considered high achieving. Subsequently, many high achieving students are expected to work independently, interpreting and adhering to teacher expectations on their own, but may lack the ability to self-differentiate and deepen their learning on their own. In order to enhance individual learning, many teachers have turned to the use of technology to enhance instruction.

Technology as an “enhancement” for instruction. Although there is mixed implementation using technology to “enhance” instruction for high achieving students between participants, the practice is becoming more widespread. Instead of enhancing instruction, this practice has, to a large degree in some cases, replaced small group instruction for high achieving
students. Many participants in the focus groups view the emergence of computers and iPads in the classroom as a way to teach their high achieving students during times they are committed to instructing others, however, at the cost of teacher to student interaction.

**Students are seen as numbers/data points.** Although teachers in the study agree that students need some sort of assessment to gauge understanding of concepts, they also argue assessments should be formative and diagnostic, not summative. High achieving students often require individualized instruction in order to cultivate interests and motivation. Common among descriptions of all focus groups was the notion students were being turned into numbers or data points, threatening their individuality.

**Standardization of students has occurred.** A vast majority of teachers interviewed expressed the belief that standardization of students due to testing was occurring within the realm of education today. Subsequently, teachers viewed this standardization as a threat to high achieving students' educational individualism in the classroom. The primary reason given for the purpose of standardized testing was accountability, leading to increased measurement of students, teachers, and schools. However, views presented described beliefs that students that are high achieving are not always easy to narrow down to a data point, especially when they achieve a high score on a baseline test that may skew growth curves on subsequent assessments.

As a result of the reliance of the district to focus on scores to determine placement along the continuum, participants describe a tendency to focus on Tier 2 and 3 students. Therefore, extended learning opportunities are becoming more difficult for teachers in this study to provide to their high achieving students due to the overall culture of accountability and testing.

**High achieving students experience a decrease in rigor.** In the words of participants, rigor has become “wildly superficial” for their high achieving students. A distinct difference in
the interpretation of rigor exists between teachers who are near the beginning of their career, and ones reaching the middle or ends of their careers. To teachers near the beginning of their careers, rigor is interpreted as being able to acquire the skills necessary to decode and answer required questions properly. To those in the middle and end of their careers, rigor is interpreted as grappling with concepts that require students to think creatively and deeply about meaningful subjects, and to challenge their own assumptions.

Although the challenge level of completing curricular tasks related to testing has increased, this does not meet the requirements to be considered rigor. These increased challenge levels due to testing and its requirements make it necessary to intervene on behalf of additional students. This challenge for additional students then requires more commitment of time and resources, further depleting potential resources for higher achieving students. The skills that are being stressed in the classroom are not emphasizing the principles of project based learning, much to the detriment of development of high achieving students’ abilities. Instead, instructional practices reflective of a culture of testing are seen instead as contrary to the goal of inspiring a love of learning.

**Findings in Relation to the Conceptual Framework**

Findings of this research were grounded in the conceptual Framework of Alignment presented by Abelmann and Elmore (2004). This framework served as a lens to better understand this study’s particular problem of practice with regard to accountability, responsibility, and expectations. Using semi-structured focus group questions (see Appendix E) designed to produce thick descriptions, participants revealed beliefs that standardized tests do have an effect on teaching and learning practices of high achieving students in this particular research setting. According to this Framework, three major components form an educational
system: Individual Responsibility, Collective Expectations, and Accountability. In this study, teachers’ individual interpretations of responsibility to high achieving students, along with interpretations of how the collective expectations of the school district and society affect instruction are influenced by the accountability of standardized tests.

Figure 4 – Conceptual Framework of Alignment (Abelmann & Elmore, 2004)

Using this model, individual teacher interpretations of responsibility toward teaching and learning of high achieving students, along with the collective expectations of the school district and society, are joined together with accountability through assessment in the form of state-wide, standardized tests. According to the Framework, each component may form the basis for instruction in the classroom. However, when combined, these three tenets lead to an integrated overlap known as Internal Alignment of Responsibility, Expectations, and Accountability.

Individual responsibility of teachers is influenced by professional activities, classroom level environment, and classroom practices (Abelmann & Elmore, 2004), as well as prior experiences. Classroom level environment, teachers’ professional activities, and school level environment relate to the Framework’s tenet of Collective Expectations (Abelmann & Elmore, 2004). This individual responsibility, as well as collective expectations, are directly influenced by the Accountability requirements at the school, district, state, and federal levels.
Accountability emerges as most influential pillar. At the beginning of the discussions, teachers’ descriptions soon aligned with one tenet of the Framework of Alignment in particular. When asked what they believed to be the purpose for state-wide standardized tests, participants’ responses drew a parallel with the tenet of Abelmann and Elmore’s (2004) Framework of Alignment on which all other principles of this theory related to this study revolve – Accountability. As teachers describe, their daily lives are overwhelmingly influenced by the specter of accountability, thereby shaping collective expectations, and finally directing individual responsibility. How each deals with instruction of high achieving students and their learning is related to personal interpretations and emphasis on either collective expectations, or an adherence to personal responsibility.

A premise of the Framework of Alignment (Abelmann & Elmore, 2004) is that “formal accountability systems influence a school’s internal conception of accountability” (p. 3). These formal accountability systems, in the form of state-wide standardized tests, directly influence the research site’s internal conceptions of accountability. As Abelmann and Elmore (2004) contend, a school’s response to external accountability “systems” (p. 6) is determined by the “degree of alignment between the schools’ internal accountability mechanisms and the requirements of the external accountability system” (p. 6). At this particular research site, alignment depends heavily on accountability as measured by standardized tests.

By way of analysis and derivation, this pressure of overriding accountability directly affects what is expected of participants. Corresponding with Abelmann and Elmore’s (2004) Framework of Alignment, collective expectations of the district to fulfill obligations of accountability ended up driving instruction throughout the school. As a result, teachers feel they are often placed in the untenable position of having a divergent personal responsibility. This
occurs when teachers must choose between fulfilling their personal responsibility to collective expectations, and meeting their personal responsibility to provide additional resources and time to their high achieving students. Teachers see a challenge in meeting the needs of their high achieving students due to the institutional and societal importance placed on standardized tests, although these tests counter what is “good teaching” (W. Ball, Grade 3; J. Bailey, Grade 4; S. Long, Grade 5). According to participants, accountability is first and foremost in the mind of “the district.” After all, standardized testing “drives instruction” (Maldonado, Powell, & Gregory, 2015).

With this description, the research site retains a “relatively explicit internal accountability system” (Abelmann & Elmore, 2004, p. 7) by “accepting and internalizing” (p. 7) the accountability aspects of standardized testing. As such, the school has accepted a high “degree of alignment between the purposes of the external accountability system and the internal norms of the school” (p. 7), thereby basing instruction and learning goals on results of standardized tests.

According to descriptions of teachers in the study, the school’s response to external accountability systems in the form of standardized tests consists of an explicit acceptance and internalization of a culture of accountability, as suggested by Abelmann and Elmore (2004). In the case of the research site, there is a high degree of alignment “between the purposes of the external accountability system, and the norms of the school” (Abelmann & Elmore, 2004, p. 7).

Although teachers throughout the focus groups agreed that their instruction and the learning of high achieving students was influenced by the accountability aspects of standardized tests, their individual responsibility and collective expectation levels varied due to experience levels. Teachers of all experience levels incorporate individual responsibility, collective
expectations, and accountability into their daily instruction and long term planning. However, a difference of interpretation exists between teachers who are new to teaching, and those who have achieved more tenure.

**Teacher experience levels in conjunction with interpretations.** According to descriptions provided by participants, accountability plays the largest role in determining educational outcomes at the research site. Influence of standardized tests comprises a major portion of the accountability pillar. Within this accountability pillar of the Framework, the influence of standardized tests overlaps both individual responsibility and collective expectations. The collective expectations of society, and therefore school districts, are directly influencing teachers’ sense personal responsibility through the enforcement of accountability. However, experience levels of participants seem to affect the amount of, or graphically the size of (see figure 5, p. 131; figure 6, p. 132) the influence levels of collective expectations and individual responsibility on instruction of high achieving students.

**Conceptual framework applied to new teachers.** Observation and analysis of new teachers (those with less than 8 years of experience) indicate collective expectations drive much of daily instruction. As participants describe the emphasis to perform on and raise scores of standardized tests, collective expectations of instructing students who are considered Tier 2 and 3 becomes a larger influence than individual responsibility to instruct higher achieving students. As noted in the diagram below, these expectations influence and “shape teacher’s work” (Abelmann & Elmore, 2004, p. 19) in a way that does not place as much importance on expending teacher time and resources on high achieving students.
Conceptual framework applied to more tenured teachers. Those with greater than 8 years of experience comprised the majority of the study population. Again through the lens of participant teachers, the influence of standardized tests overlaps both individual responsibility and collective expectations. Counter to their colleagues just entering their careers as teachers, those with more experience reflect an increased individual responsibility for the needs of their high-achieving students. Although collective expectations still play a major role in instruction and learning in their classrooms, teachers who are mid to late career teachers, in general, express a disregard for the reasoning behind standardized tests. Teachers of this experience level “speak with the language of responsibility” (Abelmann & Elmore, 2004, p. 11) when describing their instruction of high achieving students and their learning.
The expectations of collective responsibilities to fulfill curricular duties imposed by schools are sometimes lost on children aged 8-12. As participants indicate, to expect results alone does not inspire students to learn. Instead, students need to be motivated through creative endeavors that capture interest and imagination. Although recognition of this results in teachers with greater experience being able to disregard the perceptions of the importance of standardized testing in theory, the realities of teacher evaluation and job security due to accountability severely hamper instituting such practices widely.

**Findings in Relation to the Literature Review**

While there has been an abundance of research regarding the effects of standardized test results, the purpose of this study was to contribute to an under-researched area, and understand and examine how teachers in a small, suburban, intermediate school in Connecticut describe the effect that state-wide standardized tests have on their teaching and learning practices with students who are considered high achieving. The literature review reflected on the history of
standardized tests in the United States and how they evolved to become “high stakes,” the evolution of Tiered Instruction, and how the ensuing processes and culture of testing came to narrow the curriculum, reduce rigor in the classroom, and increase accountability; all of which influence instruction and learning for high achieving students. The findings of this study have an apposite connection to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

**Narrowing of the curriculum.** Participants throughout the study affirm their beliefs that standardized tests drive the curriculum. Descriptions depict a curriculum that primarily focuses on the tested subjects of reading/language arts and math. Findings of this study support previous literature in that this narrowing of the curriculum (Berliner, 2011; Burris & Welner, 2011; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Horn, 2003) relates to a decrease in rigor (Azano, Missett, Callahan, Oh, Brunner, Foster, & Moon, 2011; Cross, 2007; Dimitriadis, 2012; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010) for high achieving students. Teacher participants in the study indicate there is a culture at the research site that emphasizes instruction of reading/language art and math, at the expense of other content areas. These descriptions correspond to research by Fitchett and Heafner (2010) which contends an increase in the marginalization of subjects in pursuit of proficiency in tested areas will occur. This increased emphasis occurs through the use of pacing guides that set firm deadlines for assessments, and daily schedules determined by administration outlining the amount of instructional time (including small group tiered instruction) for each subject. Due to the emphasis on Tier 2 and 3 students, it is the reported lack of equality in resources and teacher time devoted to high achieving students that many teachers feel does not meet the needs of all their students.

**Reduction of rigor.** Numerous bodies of literature reviewed indicate the importance of higher order thinking skills in the classroom (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008; Tomlinson, 2005;
VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010). Although participant descriptions of instruction and student learning at this research site indicate a general increase in challenge, they do not necessarily indicate an increase in rigor for high achieving students. Similar to research reported by Ballet, Kelchtermans, and Loughran (2006), teachers report that accountability in the form of standardized test scores inhibits their autonomy, thereby influencing what is taught, and the instructional methods used. Further, findings indicate a loss of rigor in the form of thinking creatively and deeply about subjects and issues that relate and matter to them, and that challenge their assumptions. Participant descriptions of rigor range from misinterpreting challenge as rigor, to, in the words of one participant, being “wildly superficial.” This loss of rigor described by teachers in the study directly impacts the use of higher order thinking skills, important for not only establishing specific learning goals, but general classroom instruction as well (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008; Tomlinson, 2005; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010).

Additionally, teacher participants in the study emphasized the overall majority of their time and resources go to meeting the needs of Tier 2 and 3 students. Students who may be considered high achieving are often charged with completing independent work, or are tasked with acting as peer teachers. Descriptions provided by participants of activities such as these contradict the use of classroom practices and instruction that enhance students’ personal learning experiences that lead to inquisitive learning (Cross, 2007; Dimitriadis, 2012; Hong, Greene, & Hartzell, 2011; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010). This, in turn, leads to observable lack of motivation and disengagement from learning, as proposed by Moon, Brighton, and Callahan (2002).

Increase in accountability. Throughout the study, teachers consistently referred to the use of data in determining achievement levels of students. The high value of quantitative
measurement of students which, according to Gunzenhauser (2003), “values most highly the measurement itself” (p. 54), runs contrary and opposite of the individualized learning often necessary to adequately teach high achieving students. Due to the ramifications of receiving substandard scores, standardized tests have become known as “high stakes” (Gunzenhauser, 2003). Being high stakes, the process of preparing for these tests is counter to the beneficial, low stakes formative learning (Dorn, 2010) that supports higher order thinking. As teachers describe ideal instruction, they envision using project based learning which builds lasting, enduring understandings and promotes rigor, contrary to the behaviorist philosophy of quantitative measurement (Gunzenhauser, 2003). The type of philosophy focuses only on subjects which require accountability, marginalizing the rest (Winters, Greene, & Trivitt, 2010) and creating a gap in science and social studies instruction. Although not directly assessed by state wide standardized tests, diminished instruction in these subjects due to increased accountability in tested subjects negatively affects student learning and morale (Heilig, Cole, & Aguilar, 2010).

**Practical Implications and Recommendations**

Dimitriadis (2012) states, “…an interest in meeting the needs of mathematically gifted children, as well as the use of ability grouping and extra teaching materials, does not mean that the needs of these children are actually addressed in classrooms” (Dimitriadis, 2012, p. 70). Just because teachers have an interest in the progress of highly achieving students, it is not enough to meet their needs.

In order to address the findings of this study, practitioners and school leaders must address the issue of standardized testing driving the curriculum. The practice of curriculum narrowing in order to focus on the tested subjects of reading/language art and math at the price of
science, social studies, and the arts is seen as being detrimental to classroom instruction and learning. Although the requirements of testing are determined at the legislative level, the amount of time preparing for tests is not. Pacing, in order to cover as much potential test material as possible, is placing untenable levels of stress not only on teachers, but high achieving students as well. Consequently, tedium and frustration have severely affected the motivation, and therefore learning of students. In order to amend this lack of motivation, teachers should embrace project based learning initiatives to meet curricular demands and standards. Additionally, the school should take steps to de-emphasize the high-stakes nature of testing.

To address the issue of resource and teacher time inequity toward high achieving students, care should be taken to include students of all abilities when assessing data. Screening tools should include above grade level material in which to identify areas of strength, and the school should act to provide opportunities to explore deep learning of these interests. True rigor involves extending tasks and utilizing higher order thinking skills challenges knowledge and allows students to apply their learning to new contexts, not just more challenging test related tasks. Teachers should be encouraged and allowed to couple higher order thinking skills with instruction in a rigorous manner, allowing high achieving students to test their thinking and expand their knowledge beyond their (and sometimes their teacher’s) comfort zone. The use of technology may be a supplement to this instruction, but should not become the lone source of enrichment. Although many high achieving students are considered by some to be independent, they still require active teacher involvement. Technology should be seen as a tool by which to learn, not as the vessel through which to exclusively do it.

With standardization of the curriculum, schools run the risk of standardizing their students. School personnel should be encouraged to look “beyond the numbers” of high
achieving students, and de-emphasize “standard” lessons. In order to promote creativity and motivation, individualized learning should be emphasized, allowing students to pursue guided studies of topics that are pertinent and of high personal interest. Finally, teachers should be encouraged to assess proficiency based on demonstrated competency of standards instead of summative assessments.

Limitations

Although this general qualitative study produced a number of findings with regard to the research questions, it is important to acknowledge the limitations. The participant population numbered 27 teachers, but these individuals represented only grades 3 through 5 at one particular Connecticut school. This relatively small demographic is too narrow for the findings of the study to be generalizable to other districts. However, districts with similar profiles or student populations may find the results transferable. Additionally, only classroom teachers were solicited to take part in focus study groups. By expanding the pool of potential participants to specialists, special-education teachers, support staff, and administration, these additional individuals may have yielded alternate descriptions that may have ultimately enriched the study. Additionally, focus group interviews were held prior to the administration of Smarter Balanced testing in the spring. Revisiting focus groups after the testing period concluded may have also contributed to the descriptions the study provided.

Suggestions for Further Research

The findings of the study provided not only insight into teachers’ descriptions of how standardized tests affect their instruction and learning of high achieving students, it also provided a basis for future research. Gaps of information continue to exist as evidenced by discussions
between focus group participants. Each of these areas may provide better insight into the phenomena of standardized testing and the teaching and learning of high achieving students.

Due to participants’ interest in the use of both project based learning and new technologies to assess student progress, investigation into the effects of standardized testing on instruction in blended learning environments versus “traditional” school environments may be of interest to both researchers and practitioners. Investigation into this comparison may de-emphasize the associated pacing and narrowing of the curriculum prevalent in the culture of traditional standardized test environments.

Although the participants in this study were teachers, stakeholders in education include administrative teams as well. As partners in the education of high achieving students, researchers may consider proposing studies comparing how administrators describe the effect that state-wide standardized tests have had on teaching and learning practices for students who are considered high achieving. Comparing and contrasting the views and beliefs of these two stakeholder groups may prove useful in exploring and understanding how to better alleviate the associated culture of standardized testing.

Additionally, teachers in the study experienced a range of beliefs regarding the role and educational value of technology in the classroom. Due to the increased use of devices in schools and participants’ varying beliefs regarding the use of computers in education, there is ample room for research into the use of technology as a means of supplementing instruction for high achieving students in order to address the discrepancy between resources devoted to Tier 1 and Tier 2 and 3 students.

As participants in the study stressed the need for a departure from the use of standardized tests to determine academic progress, the educational community may be well served by an
investigation into the use of mastery-based learning as an indicator for student achievement. As opposed to the summative nature of state-wide standardized tests, a study to determine the benefits of the progressive nature and open design of mastery based assessment to high achieving students may provide research regarding how to de-emphasize and provide an alternative to high stakes tests.

Furthermore, participants in the study indicated the importance of creativity and motivation to the success of high achieving students. Investigation into how high-stakes testing environments affect creativity and motivation of high achieving students may provide insight on how to mitigate any negative effects associated with testing, contributing further to the field of education.

**Summary and Conclusion**

Although there have been numerous studies on the effects of results of standardized tests, this basic qualitative study explored teacher descriptions of the effects standardized tests have had on their instruction and the learning of their high achieving students. The conceptual framework proposed that accountability directly influences both individual responsibility and collective expectations of teachers. Of this accountability, nationally normed standardized tests have an overabundance of influence over curricular goals and decisions. The literature indicated that standardized testing narrows the curriculum, leading to a decrease in rigor for high achieving students. Responses from 27 participants who took part in semi-structured focus group interview sessions indicate agreement with the literature in that standardized tests have narrowed the curriculum and affected rigor at the research site. In addition, findings from participants' descriptions indicate standardized tests drive the curriculum, Tier 1 and 2 students receive the
bulk of teacher time and resources, and a standardization of students has occurred, all of which affect teacher instruction and learning of high achieving students.

Increased attention to the subject of mathematics and reading are encouraging, but decreased emphasis on subjects other than tested areas ultimately leads to a narrowing of the curriculum and a reduction in overall rigor for high achieving students. In order to avoid narrowing of the curriculum and lowering of rigor in the classroom, teachers, administrators, and the school district must first acknowledge the practice is occurring, and increase rigor by incorporating challenging activities that embrace higher order skills into daily practice. In order to create more equitable distribution of resources and teacher time, small group instruction should include high achieving Tier 1 students as much a priority as Tier 2 and 3. Universal screening tools must include material above grade level to enable students’ areas of strength to be identified and pursued. Identification of such areas should not preclude further exploration – on the contrary, even deeper, more rigorous knowledge and understanding should be sought so as to develop expertise in and appreciation of curricular subjects, challenging students’ own beliefs and assumptions. As students’ presumptions are challenged by increasing rigor, they are more invested in their learning. As they are more invested in their learning, they are more apt to use higher level thinking skills, creating a deeper understanding not only about themselves, but also the world around them.

**Researchers Personal Reflection**

The completion of this study has shaped me both personally and professionally. Prior to enrolling in doctoral level course work at Northeastern University, I acted solely as a practitioner. As a practitioner related to the particular problem of practice associated with this study, I engaged in simply delivering curriculum to my classes and preparing students for the
"annual test." Coursework at Northeastern challenged me to reassess my assumptions and understandings of education and to approach problems of practice from a research based scholar-practitioner role. The concept of the scholar-practitioner is interwoven throughout the educational process at Northeastern. Through the lens of a trained scholar-practitioner, issues which may otherwise seem siloed in the classroom are viewable through a global/systemic perspective. In the role of the scholar-practitioner, knowledge of the issue is not enough – action must be undertaken in order to address issues raised within the realm of education today. As a scholar-practitioner, the findings of this study are alarming.

Conducting this study may very well be the first step toward addressing this particular problem of practice at the research location. Prior to this study, individuals/participants felt as if their opinions regarding instruction and the learning of their high achieving students were unique or uncommon. The bringing together of these participants allowed for a frank, collegial discussion which in turn ignited a spark which may lead to action. Coming together to discuss themes related to the study enabled teachers to recognize their colleagues’ perspectives, giving credence to their own feelings that a problem exists. Sharing my own experiences as a scholar-practitioner has encouraged participants at the site to question policy decisions through a research-based perspective. This process in turn provided a way for individuals to begin discussions on how to address the culture of standardized tests and high achieving students.

As a scholar-practitioner, I am dedicated to solving educational problems through research based practice. My work at Northeastern has clearly allowed me to hone my abilities in order to make a positive impact on the field of education today. Completing this research project is not the culminating activity in Northeastern University’s doctor of education program - it is truly just the first step in a lifelong pursuit of improving education.
References


doi:10.1080/00220272.2010.521261


*Psychologist, 45*(2), 123–137.


Appendix A

Letter of Introduction

Dear Educator,

As many of you know, I am currently pursuing my Doctor of Education degree at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts.

As part of this endeavor, I will be conducting a research study examining teachers’ descriptions of the effects that standardized tests have had on teaching and learning practice for students that are considered high achieving.

I am currently seeking classroom teachers to take part in this study. Participating in this study will entail engaging in a focus group interview discussing issues around standardized tests and your perspective on their effects on your instruction, and students. Three separate focus groups will be formed: one for third grade teachers, one for fourth grade teachers, and one for fifth grade teachers. These focus group interviews will consist of guided discussions which will be audiotaped for later transcription and analysis. This study may also involve the use of observation, and document analysis.

Please consider this letter a formal request for your participation. Focus group interviews will last approximately 60-90 minutes, and will be conducted in corresponding grade level classrooms at a time convenient to participants.

Any and all participation in this study will be held in strict confidentiality: names and any identifiable personal information will not be used. You will be able to refuse to answer any question, and you may discontinue participation at any time, for any reason, without consequence or repercussion.

Please be aware that agreeing to participate, or refusing to participate, will in no way affect your work here in the school, or our professional relationship as colleagues.

Please respond confidentially to Puhlick.m@husky.neu.edu if you are interested, or have any comments, questions, or concerns.

Respectfully,

Matthew P.W. Puhlick
Appendix B

Signed Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Education Department

Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Sara Ewell, Principal Investigator; Matthew P.W. Puhlick, Student Researcher

Title of Project: Testing! Testing! 1, 2, 3… Redefining who we leave behind: Standardized tests and high-achieving students

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You are being recruited to participate in this study because you are a classroom teacher who is subject administering state-wide standardized tests.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this study is to examine teacher descriptions of the effects of standardized tests on instruction and learning for high-achieving students.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to complete a face-to-face focus group interview with other teachers from your grade. This focus group interview will be audio recorded for transcription at a later time. You may also be asked to allow observation of your classroom, and analysis of documents related to the study.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
You will be interviewed in a group setting within a grade level classroom. Focus group interviews will take between 60-90 minutes. After transcription of interviews takes place, you will be asked to review the transcript for accuracy and validity. You will have one week in which to do this review.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this study.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, your professional descriptions and beliefs regarding the effects of standardized tests on instruction and learning for high-achieving students will potentially contribute to scholarly literature. Additionally, this educational community may benefit from a re-examination of how classroom practices can be revised or refined to benefit students of all levels and abilities.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researcher of this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project.
In order to ensure anonymity, coding and the use of pseudonyms will utilized with participants. In order to determine pseudonyms, the researcher will use www.randomnames.com to select random names. In the event that a random pseudonym uses the same first letter of an actual name, or if a randomly generated name has phonetic components of a participant’s actual name (i.e. – Pat/Matt), a new name will be generated. Names will be coded and stored using password protection in Microsoft Word. These files will be saved locally to the researcher’s password protected computer, and no online retrieval system will be used.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?
No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of my participation in this research.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Matthew Puhlick via phone at 860.303.8189, or email at puhlick.m@husky.neu.edu. You can also contact Sara Ewell, Ph.D., the Principal Investigator of the study via email at s.ewell@neu.edu.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
No remuneration will be offered for participation in this study.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
There are no costs associated with participation in this study.

☐ I agree to take part in this research.

_____________________________________________ __________________________  
Signature of person agreeing to take part  Date

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

_____________________________________________ __________________________  
Signature of person who explained the study to the  Date
Participant above and obtained consent

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix C

Doctoral Thesis Proposal

DTP Outline

Introduction: This Doctoral Thesis Proposal outlines the culminating research project required to fulfill the requirements of the Doctor of Education degree as prescribed by the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts.

The size of the district, the experience levels of the teachers, and the commitment to incorporating the latest educational trends makes (XXXXXXXXXXX) an ideal location for this study.

As an employee of the District since 2000, I am naturally inclined to pursue educational research at (XXXXXXXXXXX).

Rationale: One of the most commonly used tools for determining student achievement is the standardized test. Often, schools may focus on raising the scores of students in the middle of the achievement spectrum to goal, while devoting less time and resources on students already able to pass these tests (Amrein-Beardsley, 2009).

Since standardized test results have become the yardstick by which to measure underperforming students, schools, and districts, a great deal of emphasis is placed on raising scores. To some there remains a perception that academically challenged students receive the bulk of the teacher’s time and educational resources in order to make them proficient on standardized tests, universal screens, and progress monitoring tests (Amrein-Beardsley, 2009). This practice has led some schools and districts to devote additional time to preparation for state-wide tests. This practice, also known as narrowing of the curriculum (Berliner, 2011; Burris & Welner, 2011; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Horn, 2003), has then led to a decrease in rigor in the classroom for high achieving students (Azano, Missett, Callahan, Oh, Brunner, Foster, & Moon, 2011; Cross, 2007; Dimitriadis, 2012; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010).

Problem statement: As a result of the potential ramifications of not performing well on standardized tests, standardized testing has led to a narrowing of the curriculum, thereby lowering rigor in the classroom, especially for students who are able to achieve benchmarks more easily and quickly (Azano, Missett, Callahan, Oh, Brunner, Foster, & Moon, 2011; Cross, 2007; Dimitriadis, 2012; VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2010).

Purpose statement and research questions: This study seeks to understand and examine how teachers in a small, suburban, elementary school in Connecticut describe the effect that state-wide standardized tests have on their teaching and learning practices with students who are considered high achieving. Investigating these descriptions and perceptions may contribute to reassessing and determining appropriate levels of instruction for high achieving students.
The following questions will guide the study:

1. How do teachers in a suburban elementary school in Connecticut describe the effect that state-wide standardized tests have had on teaching and learning practices for students who are able to achieve benchmarks quickly and easily?

2. How do teachers view the overall increase or decrease of rigor in the classroom as a result of the increased significance of standardized testing for students that are considered high achieving?

There is no hypothesis for this general qualitative study.

**Theoretical Framework:** Abelmann and Elmore’s (2004) conceptual Framework of Alignment will be utilized. Abelmann and Elmore (2004) describe three major components to an educational system: individual responsibility, collective expectations, and accountability. Using this model, individual teacher responsibility towards student success, along with the collective expectations of the school district and society, are joined together with accountability through assessment.

**Methodological Approach:** General Qualitative Study (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2014).

**Research site (proposed):** (XXXXXXXXXXXXXX).

**Participants:** Certified, self-contained classroom teachers who teach content area subjects at the upper elementary level (grades 3-5). Participants of this study will be selected from the overall population of certified, self-contained classroom teachers at XXXXXXXXX School. As this study is concerned with descriptions of the effect that state wide standardized tests have on teaching and learning practices for high-achieving students, participant teachers in this population sample must teach the tested subjects of language arts and/or mathematics. In order to have perspective, and put teaching and learning in context, participants must also have taught during the administration of at least one state-wide, standardized test.

**Data collection:** Focus group interviews, teacher observation, document analysis.

**Confidentiality:** In order to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, coding and the use of pseudonyms will utilized with participants.

In addition to the protection of teachers as participants, due diligence must be taken to ensure the school district itself is not identifiable. Fictitious names for the school and district will be utilized to avoid undue scrutiny after publication of the study.
References


Horn, C. (2003). High-stakes testing and students: Stopping or perpetuating a cycle of failure?. *Theory into Practice, 42*(1), 30-41.


Appendix D

Letter of Consent from Superintendent

January 23, 2015

Matthew Puhlick

RE: Request to conduct research at [Redacted] School

Dear Mr. Puhlick:

Your request to conduct research related to your doctoral project (Northeastern University IRB#: CPS14-12-17) at [Redacted] School is approved.

Sincerely,

[Redacted]

Superintendent of Schools

Title of Research: Testing! Testing! 1, 2, 3… Redefining Who We Leave Behind: Standardized Tests and High Achieving Students
Appendix E

Focus Group Interview Questions

If you had to categorize what “level” of students receive the bulk of resources and teacher time in the classroom, which “demographic” would that be?

Is there an emphasis on high achieving students in the classroom?

What are your perceptions about reasons for standardized tests?

How have standardized tests influenced the curriculum you teach?

How have standardized tests influenced the way you teach high achieving students in your classroom?

In what ways do you view how delivery of instruction has changed in relation to the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) test?

How do you perceive the overall effects of standardized testing on students?

Thinking about your classrooms and how you carry out instruction, is there an emphasis on certain subjects, instead of others? What factors determine this emphasis?

The emphasis on tested subject matter in favor of non-test of material has been called narrowing of the curriculum. If you have experienced this phenomena, how would you describe your classroom instructional experiences with narrowing of the curriculum?

In what ways do you think this has impacted high achieving students in your classroom?

What are your perceptions regarding the level of rigor in the classroom for high achieving students as a result of the increased significance of standardized testing?

Why is that?
Appendix F

Transcriptionist Statement of Confidentiality

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Transcription Services

Title: Testing! Testing! 1, 2, 3... Redefining who we leave behind: Standardized tests and high achieving students

Matthew P.W. Puhlick
Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Anita Estrella

I, the transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regards to any and all audiotapes and documentation received from Matthew P.W. Puhlick related to his doctoral study, Testing! Testing! 1, 2, 3... Redefining who we leave behind: Standardized tests and high achieving students.

Furthermore, I agree:

1. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently revealed during the transcription of audio-taped interviews, or in any associated documents;

2. To not make copies of any audiotapes or computerized files of the transcribed interview texts, unless specifically requested to do so by Matthew P.W. Puhlick;

3. To store all study-related audiotapes and materials in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession;

4. To return all audiotapes and study-related documents to Matthew P.W. Puhlick in a complete and timely manner;

5. To delete all electronic files containing study-related documents from my computer hard drive and any backup devices two weeks after delivery of transcripts.

I am aware that I can be held legally liable for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the audiotapes and/or files to which I will have access.

Transcriber’s signature ___________________ Date ___________ 2/19/15
Appendix G

Protection of Human Research Participants Training Certificate

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that Matthew Puhlick successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course “Protecting Human Research Participants”.

Date of completion: 11/13/2013
Certification Number: 1319424