Understanding Elementary Teachers’ Experiences and Utilization of Formative Assessments

A thesis presented

by

JoAnn M. Passeri

to

The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

in the field of

Education

College of Professional Studies

Northeastern University

Boston, Massachusetts

March, 2017
Abstract

The role of assessment in our educational system has created as many questions as answers to how our schools utilize and value assessment models and processes. This research study sought to understand teachers’ experiences and uses of assessments and the connection this has to student learning and assessment practice. Since teachers make a variety of decisions throughout the school day, this aspect of the assessment process provided a firm standing to employ the theory of goal-orientated decision making in the analysis. The focus of this research was to study data conducted from elementary teachers’ experiences with assessments, as well as record their views, utilization of formative assessment, and the reasoning behind their choices. Highlighting teachers’ views and decision making opens the conversation of the assessment debate and also, becomes a window into their emphasis and focus on assessment. It was proposed that the context of their school, prior training, current professional development, and personal pedagogical philosophy might have relevance to their thinking and would be noted. This study strove to highlight unrecorded efforts by teachers who may have explored new methods and also, formulate data on the efficacy of these assessments. Their experiences and perspectives informed the study of the current assessment climate within one region and became the basis for comparing their similarities of practice.

Key words: assessment; formative assessment; summative standardized assessment; teacher instructional decision-making; teacher perceptions
Dedication

This doctoral thesis is dedicated to my husband and best friend, Dan,

and our two wonderful children, Sara and Mark,

who have inspired and encouraged me throughout the process.
Acknowledgements

To my family and friends, you inspired me to venture onto this path and I am so very grateful for your support and encouragement these past three years. Thank you for cheering me on each step of the way!

To my advisor, Dr. Karen Reiss Medwed, thank you for your wisdom and guidance throughout this study’s evolution from thoughts to thesis. Our conversations always ended with an insightful point for me to consider and a reminder to advocate for change. Additionally, I send many thanks to Dr. Kelly Conn and Dr. Brian Fay for their time to support me as members of the dissertation committee. Having this first official discussion about my topic accentuated what I hope to be true, the dissertation is not the end of this path but the beginning of a new journey to come.

And finally, with much fanfare for these hard-working professionals … to my colleagues who so kindly shared their experiences and expertise with me for this study, thank you for your dedication and great work as teachers. I look forward to hearing about what new and innovative assessment activities you will be creating next!
# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................. 3

Dedication ................................................................................................................. 4

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................. 5

Table of Contents .................................................................................................... 6

Chapter I: Introduction .............................................................................................. 9

  Statement of the Problem ........................................................................................ 9

  Significance of Research Problem ......................................................................... 13

  Positionality Statement .......................................................................................... 17

  Research Question ................................................................................................ 21

  Theoretical Framework .......................................................................................... 21

Chapter II: Literature Review ..................................................................................... 29

  The Purpose of Assessment .................................................................................... 30

  The Role of Context and the Resources Available .................................................. 40

  Research Theory and Practice .............................................................................. 46

  Counterarguments and Cautions ........................................................................... 52

  Literature Review Summary .................................................................................. 54

Chapter III: Methodology ......................................................................................... 56

  Revisiting the Research Question .......................................................................... 56

  Research Method ................................................................................................... 57

  Research Design .................................................................................................... 59

  Research Tradition ................................................................................................ 60

  Participants ............................................................................................................. 61
Understanding Elementary Teachers’ Experiences and Utilization of Formative Assessment

Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Formative assessment has been moved from the back pages of the assessment portfolio to the forefront in many schools across the nation. After more than twenty years of research and development, the advantages and efficacy of these assessment models, methods, and strategies have proven to enhance learning and inform practice (Black & Wiliam, 2009). It is a mystery then, to realize how many teachers still do not regularly utilize formative assessment within their instruction. Various studies propose varying explanations, such as, some districts primarily encourage the use of selected-response tests to provide practice for mandated standardized testing (McMillan, 2000) and other districts provide insufficient professional development to sustain a change in assessment practices (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2004). There continues to be a reliance on commercially authored, standardized summative testing. An industry has prospered around this reliance and districts have built their curriculum around the use of these tests. In some states, there has been a new paradigm shift in the educational community about the future of present standardized testing. The various stakeholders, including taxpayers, politicians, the business community, and parents, have professed a need for changes. Many assessment authors are redesigning controversial tests, which should mark a new era. However, some educational experts already see problems arising (Schoenfeld, 2015). How are current classrooms utilizing assessments and in particular, how do teachers perceive the ways formative assessment fit into these models?
The focus of this research was to study data conducted from elementary teachers’ experiences with assessments, as well as record their views, utilization of formative assessment, and the reasoning behind their choices. Highlighting teachers’ views and decision making opens the conversation of the assessment debate and also, becomes a window into their emphasis and focus on assessment. It was proposed that the context of their school, prior training, current professional development, and personal pedagogical philosophy might have relevance to their thinking and would be noted. This study strove to highlight unrecorded efforts by teachers who may have explored new methods and also, formulate data on the efficacy of these assessments. Topics relating to teachers’ instructional decision-making, teachers’ views and perceptions, and teachers’ voice within the conversation of assessment were studied and addressed.

**Past Views of the Problem.**

In the past, teachers have been critical of the narrow educational focus of standardized testing (Blanchard, 2008). However, grading practices showed a reliance on standardized testing and inconsistencies among other assessment practices (McMillan, Myran, & Workman, 2002). Far too many pre-service programs had not educated teachers in the effective use of assessments and in consequence, many teachers viewed formative assessment as another burden in their instruction (Heritage, 2007; Quilter & Gallini, 2000). Also, there was evidence substantiating how school culture influenced teachers’ willingness to examine and adjust their own knowledge and beliefs pedagogically (Jurasaitė-Harbison & Rex, 2010). Even when there was professional development provided for teachers, real changes in beliefs and practices were not a given. Integration of new ideas was greatly enhanced when teachers had the opportunity to become more reflective about their practice (Harrison, 2013; Trauthe-Nare & Buck, 2011). Often, research studies viewed teachers from a deficit perspective, whereby teachers lack assessment
understanding (Howley, Howley, Henning, Gillam, & Weade, 2013). Instead, their views should be included in the discussion (Howley et al., 2013). There remained a need to investigate current teachers’ views and how these views can enhance discussions.

**Need for New Evidence.**

Vanderlinde and van Braak (2010) recommend conducting research between scholarly assessment recommendations and actual assessment practice. Past studies need updating for this current assessment climate, not just identifying which assessments are used, but also analyzing the reasoning behind the choices. Many studies approach assessment from only one perspective (Brookhart, 2004). Research compiling data on what current teachers are finding efficacious in their classrooms could uncover the value teachers actually have for assessments and formative assessment. This data is greatly needed to enhance and guide our understanding of instruction and student learning. Formative assessments are not new to the classroom. However, they are still underutilized and in some cases, incorrectly used, which disregards what assessment experts recommend (McMillan, 2003). It is important to understand how teachers make their assessment decisions and to understand the discrepancies between the beliefs they espouse and what they actually enact (Olafson & Schraw, 2010). We should not exclusively investigate what teachers believe or independently measure the extent of their knowledge about assessments but instead, seek to understand how these two aspects intersect in the classroom (Schoenfeld, 2015).

There are many important contributions by practitioners used to inform instruction in their everyday classrooms. There is a need for more discussions with teachers to clarify how and why they utilize certain assessments over other assessments (McMillan et al., 2002). It is an essential element to consider what teachers’ views are before assessment attitudes can be altered (Quilter & Gallini, 2000). Highlighting the reasoning behind what teachers are doing illustrates
where their focus is concentrated and can become a starting point for change. Giving teachers an opportunity to participate in determining the process for changing assessment focuses, creates positive balances between teaching and learning (Blanchard, 2008).

**Research’s Relevance for Changing Future Assessment Practices.**

It is hoped the data and analysis of this study will contribute to the body of knowledge utilized by professional development leaders, curriculum leaders, administrators, school policy leaders, educators of teachers, and assessment designers, with a goal of enhancing our understanding of effective assessments and student learning. Standard assessment tools are known to overlook students from disadvantaged circumstances, as the students might not have the language or knowledge-base to fully understand the curriculum as presented (Ladson-Billings, 2007; Lee, 1998; Popham, 2007; Smith-Maddox, 1998). Each day brings opportunities to make decisions about assessments in the classroom. An increased use of formative assessment adds opportunities to design culturally responsive assessment tools that are meant to encourage struggling students, not discourage them. The data shared could help create viable formative assessment models, methods, and strategies, in order to provide sustainable classroom tools for all students. There continues to be questions and concerns about the complexity of how teachers relate to assessment and its relationship to instruction (Black, 2015). Research needs to continually ask, what are current teachers’ assessment decisions within the classroom, how did their assessment practice develop, and how do they feel about changing their assessment practice? Research should also explore the complex relationships between administrators’ mandates, curricular expectations, and the reliance on standardized testing within the modern classroom. Involving teachers’ experiences and views could enhance this conversation and become an integral component for initiating change (Blanchard, 2008).
Significance of Research Problem

Each year schools across the nation are required to administer state-wide, district-wide, and grade-level standardized assessment tests. The function of these annual tests in elementary through high school has been to show academic progress and then, the data gathered becomes the basis to establish schools’ standings and funding allocations. Some districts have felt the negative impacts and ramifications. Even though there has been a reliance on lengthy, yearly, summative tests to determine student achievement, the results have not been as hoped. After twenty years of reforms, there continues to be inconsistent growth. In consequence, new national debates had begun to emerge. In New York, twenty percent of the state’s students opted not to take their 2015 state standardized tests (Hamilton, 2015). In California, wide score disparities between ethnic groups still hampered positive outcomes in the Los Angeles Unified School District, the nation’s second largest school district (Cusak, 2016). For 2015, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported that the nation’s 4th and 8th grade average scores were lower than the 2013 scores in mathematics assessment, stayed constant for 4th grade average scores in reading, and were lower in 8th grade reading (NAEP, 2015). The average scores showed only about one third of 4th and 8th graders were proficient or above in reading, forty percent of 4th graders were proficient or above in mathematics, and thirty-three percent of 8th graders were proficient or above in mathematics (NAEP, 2015). Across the nation, only Massachusetts’ students surpassed the fifty percent average score range. What obstacles have these schools overcome and what can be learned from these teachers? Is there an approach to assessments that should be noted?

Our public schools’ goals often include fostering achievement for all students. Schools strive to promote accelerating students who are achieving above grade level and provide
remediation for those below grade level (Valli & Buese, 2007). Yet, too many students continue to have difficulties. Every student is required to participate in taking standardized tests, regardless of their academic, emotional, or English language abilities (Favero & Meier, 2013). Their inclusion has not always been a successful process. Some schools have tried to cope by surreptitiously teaching subjects in a test-prep mode. The process of building students’ understanding, whereby knowledge is formed before building new knowledge, is bypassed for the pressure of test scores. In recent years, it has been reported that standardized and commercially-made tests are not in sync with the process of instruction, but classrooms continue to rely on them (Popham, 2007). How are these practices formed by teachers and what is the significance of this reliance? New questions should address how the present assessment practice can satisfy both the need for data and actual improvements in student learning (Klinger & Rogers, 2011).

Present concerns have also noted how high-stakes standardized tests’ accuracy and value have come under scrutiny. Their purposes have been questioned and there have been issues surrounding students’ preparation for standardized tests (Popham, 2007). Even though some teachers have had successes and “measurable” student achievement, too many others have had great difficulties. For too long there has been a call to fix the academic ailments of students by assessing what was or was not accomplished in a year. Regardless that students have poor test results after the year is over, too much valuable time has elapsed (Black et al., 2004). There remains a need for schools to seek supplemental, supporting, and/or alternative assessments to help assess students, during the process of instruction not at the end of a school year, even if in preparation for standardized summative tests. Lane (2004) described a need to design and organize tests that align with curriculum, illuminate proficiency, and inform teacher practice.
However, teachers continue to feel pressure to conform to the high-stakes testing environment. Teachers have acknowledged the intentions of standardized assessment for improving instruction, student learning, and accountability but there are many divergent views as to the present testing programs in most schools (Klinger & Rogers, 2011; Murnane & Papay, 2010). When seeking future solutions for a unified path forward, what can be learned from teachers’ actual experiences with all forms of assessments and how does this influence their utilization of assessments in the classroom?

Schools have had to come to terms with the fact that standardized testing will not be phased out any time soon and students will still need to be prepared to take these tests. Many districts continue to seek out answers and are looking for changes within the present system. There is a large body of research literature on assessments and educational leaders must be aware of the different philosophical approaches to the assessment process. There are vast differences in opinions on the validity and reliability of the various assessment models and methods. When assessments are designed with all students in mind, leaders continuously ask how each student is progressing towards competency; how the program provides time and support for students; and most importantly, how effective is the school (Stiggins & DuFour, 2009). In this philosophy, the negative sense of how well the students are doing, is dismissed. Conversely, a discriminatory notion of assessments and student scores might be used as proof that a rigorous, exclusive program cannot be attained when students have a language barrier, cultural differences, or experience the deficit effects of poverty (Ladson-Billings, 2007). Responding to the individual strengths and needs of students requires teachers who have been involved in the assessment process and have played a part in developing the assessments used (Rigsby & DeMulder, 2003).
Even with the on-going high-stakes testing environment, teachers continue to have a certain amount of autonomy and discretion within their classrooms. Some districts have found the positive aspects of formative assessments, which give teachers effective methods that are diagnostic and also, inform instruction more precisely than yearly or end of unit summative assessments (Conderman & Hedin, 2012; Kinzer & Taft, 2012; Stiggins & DuFour, 2009). These methods and strategies enhance teachers’ understanding of students’ grasp of concepts in daily and weekly lessons (Conderman & Hedin, 2012; Kinzer & Taft, 2012; Stiggins & DuFour, 2009). Additionally, these assessments become of greater value when tailored to be authentic to the curriculum; are incorporated into classroom routines; have a student self-monitoring component; are diagnostic; and are inclusive or culturally sensitive (Black et al., 2004; Lee, 1998). Having a deep understanding of assessments improves student learning by adjusting methods and altering instructional strategies, which in turn, can be used to accommodate for the needs of all students. These past, positive experiences are also important to add and compare when exploring teachers’ current perspectives.

It remains unclear how current teachers’ perspectives connect with their utilization of formative assessments, especially when the assessments are not specifically part of a school’s curriculum. Assessments used in the classroom sit at the intersection of theory and practice (Brookhart, 2004). This intersection of research’s new instructional and assessment ideas and practitioners reasoning behind their reluctance to utilize them, is lacking in the literature. Researchers give their recommendations, but do not explore the teachers’ reasoning to discount the recommendations and continue with past practices. At the same time, researchers have also neglected to consult with teachers when designing new practices. For example, one study developing assessment models did not value the input of teachers until the pilot study confirmed
their concerns (Brandon, Young, Shavelson, Jones, Ayala, Ruiz-Primo, & Yin, 2008). The researchers acknowledged the value of teacher input and the teachers acknowledged the value of the improved assessment methods and strategies (Brandon et al., 2008). What deeper lessons can be applied toward future studies?

The clarification and utilization of effective assessment practices should be addressed before more recommendations can be presented. It remains unclear why teachers choose to use or choose not to use innovative assessments. Even now after years of reforms, there has not been an agreement on what constitutes a valid test that authentically represents all forms of thinking, learning, language nuances, cultural differences, and social backgrounds. Mandating too many policy demands has resulted in teacher discouragement and at times, superficial alignment with administrative goals (Valli & Buese, 2007). Research should build a more comprehensive understanding of what teachers’ experiences are with assessments and how these experiences have affected their choices (Duncan & Noonan, 2007). The positive experiences can provide guidance for future instructional and assessment development and the negative experiences can provide informative insights. Through this understanding, education and meaningful changes to inform practices can be suggested, designed, and implemented. Meaningful changes and outcomes are more likely when teachers are participants in the inquiry process (Compton, 2010; Ermeling, 2010; Singh, 2011).

**Positionality Statement**

**Background and Bias.**

The impetus for my research topic came a few years before, from another course of study. While taking courses in mathematics education, I was struck by research literature examining continued stalled progress and low achievement across the curriculum in many public
schools. Where I had experienced teaching in progressive schools, the literature described others hampered by an overemphasis on standardized testing, underperforming students, and adverse administrative policies. I began to ask what was missing from these school programs and what had happened to the reforms? As an elementary school teacher and parent, I joined the multitude of voices questioning what could be done to help improve the situation for these students. I turned my focus to doctoral research and its potential for advocacy and change.

Looking back on my own experiences of six different school systems, I realized there can be vast differences in school curricular and policies. My first community was not wealthy but had highly educated parents supporting the school. Another school was a place of great differences. Some students had involved professional parents while others were vastly underprivileged and lived in a dangerous city housing project. Within these socioeconomic groupings were students who thrived in the school setting and those whose personal issues overwhelmed their development. As their teacher, I felt an immense responsibility to know “where they were” academically and emotionally, and felt accountable for their progress. It would have been helpful to have quality, ready-made assessment tools that were flexible enough to address the ever-changing needs of my students. Instead, I used a trial and error design method. At the time, it seemed of little use to seek out research literature for advice, as it was often felt that research was disconnected from actual practice. This gap exists when researchers conduct studies to acquire theoretical knowledge for their own fields, regardless of its applicability or viability, and practitioners need information for instructional solutions (Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). My best strategy became utilizing many different assessment strategies. To stay ahead of the students’ progress, I used a hybrid of published assessment tools and my own creations.
Keeping notations and anecdotal records were very time consuming but extremely important for my understanding of each student. To remain objective, it was important not to categorize or stereotype students, which often occurs when trying to describe a situation through one’s own experiences. I did not want to judge students through my own personal values and expectations (Briscoe, 2005). I hoped to understand the students’ background and the implications on their academic progress and emotional well-being. At that time, I was aware of the students’ cultural capital but only later, became aware of the influences of my own. I wish I had understood more clearly the correlated effects on the students between negative aspirational, linguistic, and navigational capital and how it attributed to their resistance capital and resistance to learn (Yosso, 2005). Would this knowledge have changed my assessment practice?

Connections as a Scholar Practitioner.

Being aware of one’s positionality is important to reveal perceptions and dispel biases. I began to wonder if the issues at faltering schools pertained to underfunding, school disparity, or incompetence. As a hard-working teacher and parent, I had seen some great schools and those with problems. I had concluded that effective teachers seek support and ineffective teachers do not. Additionally, I saw that effective teachers looked more deeply into their own practice and choose the methods and strategies that show promise. However, I knew I could not fall back on easy answers or a systematic blame towards uncaring teachers, callous administrators, or misguided standardized testing. As Briscoe (2005) stated, researchers should be aware of biases when bringing their own experiences to the new role of scholar practitioners. I saw the value for this study of exploring a variety of teachers’ practices, but to do so with an effort to recognize and contain my own preconceived notions.
My initial plans concentrated on researching these questions within the educational group I knew best, specifically, teachers within the upper elementary grades and their uses of formative assessments. The teachers’ views and experiences are very important when trying to understand a school’s assessment philosophy. With this understanding, I planned to record how the current assessment and accountability issues influenced and guided their choices. I was interested in their responses not just to collect data, but to learn something that could inform my own practice and that of my school, as well. Since students’ testing information should be used to make important decisions about learning, it is imperative to obtain information that is accurate and of instructional value.

Each research study is a reflection of the researchers’ past, present, and future intentions within a topic of study. My observations on student learning came from working in a variety of schools and classrooms, graduate coursework, and my own family and friends. This multi-tiered perspective is a view of learning from many angles. Students, parents, and teachers were elated with students’ success and frustrated with students having difficulties. I began to ponder what could help make a difference between the two scenarios. I wanted to understand more than just what children should learn but also, how children learn. I saw the value of understanding assessment, it connection with instruction, and its influence on student learning. This positionality did not end with the introduction to the study. Even the choice of literature I cited and the participants I selected, revealed my positionality as a researcher (Machi & McEvoy, 2012). For this study, I recognized the responsibility to choose varied literature and to consider different, even opposing points of view. As scholar practitioners, a noted positionality, we must also be cognizant of the practical application and viability of our work. Our positionality as
scholar practitioners does not change the memory of our experiences but does help us to interpret them in new, open, and scholarly ways.

**Research Question**

The education community cannot ignore how the present testing regimes have caused concerns about improving student learning. This topic has been controversial and we need new data to understand the usage, perceptions, and experiences teachers have with various assessment models, used within current classrooms. An exploratory study with a semi-structured question protocol could help begin this needed conversation. Through an interview process, information from teachers can be gathered and examined for common experiences, themes, and explanations. Then through an inductive process, a theory or useful concepts may arise that can explain the current notions of this problem of practice (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This qualitative interview study seeks to understand and explain elementary teachers’ experiences and utilization of assessments.

The research question guiding this study focuses on:

*How do teachers describe their assessment practice?*

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study was based on the theory of goal-orientated decision making, developed by Alan Schoenfeld and described in his 2011 book, *How We Think, A Theory of Goal-Orientated Decision Making and Its Educational Applications*. Schoenfeld (2011a) used the process of problem-solving as a framework for his theory and equated the work of teaching as a series of complex problem solving activities that become well practiced over time. Within these activities, decisions are made in the moment and on a continuous basis,
throughout the day. Schoenfeld (2011a) offered a theoretical account of the complex interactions and decision making teachers experience both consciously and unconsciously. This theory described how and why individuals make their decisions within their practice and has worked well with the research question of this study. The large decisions of the modern classroom have often become well-regulated through district and federal mandates, the Common Core State Standards, and a reliance on commercial materials (Schoenfeld, 2015). Of great interest to this study is how teachers approached the small specific instructional decisions, such as the use of formative assessments, which are needed for understanding each student’s progress, within each lesson.

Additionally, the role of instructional and assessment decision making was considered as proposed by James McMillan in his 2003 article, “Understanding and Improving Teachers’ Classroom Assessment Decision Making: Implications for Theory and Practice.” McMillan outlined how teachers’ knowledge and beliefs are interconnected to the context of their school, their decision-making rationale, and assessment practices. McMillan (2003) explored the process of assessment decision making as a possible theoretical framework to understand teachers’ assessment practices. He also makes connections of assessments and instruction to constructivist theories of learning, which was discussed within the role of decision making, and its influence on how teachers purport to implement assessments.

**Understanding Decision Making.**

Schoenfeld (2011a) sees the process of teacher decision making, both large over-arching decisions and small specific decisions, as predicated on three key constructs. These guide the events and lesson segments within instruction and consist of:
1. The goals associated with the instructional and assessment activities, the actual lessons and the actors participating in the events.

2. The teacher’s orientations or beliefs, values, preferences, and past experiences that can influence decision making.

3. The material resources available for instruction and the individual teacher’s knowledge base (Schoenfeld, 2011a).

From these constructs, many possible decisions can evolve. Schoenfeld (2011a) is concerned with how teachers interact and react within a problem-state through the evaluation of a problem/situation/lesson confronting its progress. Intertwined with every sequence of actions can be a consistent “series of goal prioritizations that are grounded in the teacher’s beliefs and orientations, and the selection, once a goal has been given highest priority, of resources intended to help achieve that goal” (Schoenfeld, 2011b, p.460). These goals are formed under the orientation of the teachers, as well as the external requirements of the school and the internal pressures of the classroom. Detecting the underlying orientations of individual teachers helps to uncover the reasoning behind his or her decisions and goal choices. Sometimes there are multiple goals and not all goals can be fulfilled, and so, possible options and outcomes are determined through a cost-benefit analysis (Schoenfeld, 2011a). How teachers interact and react with their beliefs about instruction and assessment becomes relational to how they interact and react to the barriers they encounter to follow through with these beliefs (Olafson & Schraw, 2010).

An additional dimension to be considered is the context of the classroom and its ever changing, highly interactive environment (Schoenfeld, 2011a). Individual decisions come from a complex interplay of the actors involved and a dynamically changing environment (Schoenfeld, 2011a). Time experienced in the classroom is one factor influencing a teacher’s interaction
within the classroom. When teachers are in the early years of their careers, their decision-making strategies are primarily dedicated to learning classroom management and their instructional decision making is limited (Schoenfeld, 2011a). As levels of proficiency and experience increases, less time and energy is spent on classroom management and increasingly spent on implementing engaging activities and diagnostic teaching (Schoenfeld, 2011a). Eventually, when teachers become highly accomplished and experienced, equal amounts of time are spent engaging in diagnostic teaching and implementing engaging activities, with little classroom management time allotted because students are actively engaged (Schoenfeld, 2011a). All along these time periods, the instructional and assessment decisions made play a fundamental role in shaping each environment (Schoenfeld, 2011a).

Schoenfeld studied how the reasoning behind teachers’ actions and the students’ reactions can be determined by various directions and options within each given situation. Often the events of the classroom become a part of a well-ordered routine, but sometimes unexpected events or student questions break that routine and require a new decision path (Schoenfeld, 2011a). Some decision options evolve into the routine decisions of planned instruction and other options become the complex non-routine decisions needed to address the changing context of classroom situations (Schoenfeld, 2011a). Keeping this process at a high-level of learning requires keeping all students within the process, in order to produce a productive environment. One snapshot of this process can be illustrated as a decision tree (see Figure 1).

This decision process is not always straight forward. The teacher’s orientation towards the content of the lesson, pedagogical practices, and the perception of the students can also influence these decisions (Schoenfeld, 2011b). However, this process does not occur in isolation, but as clusters of beliefs that are triggered by the context of the situations (Schoenfeld.
This new approach to understanding decision making comes from a need to see the whole picture and to understand how the three constructs of goals, orientations, and resources and knowledge interact and contribute to the moments of decision making (Schoenfeld, 2011b). On a broader front this process can be described as iterative and dynamic:

1. A teacher works within a particular context with specific resources, orientations, and goals.
2. Information and knowledge becomes salient and activates a plan of action.
3. Instructional goals are established or reinforced.
4. Decisions are made and monitored for the next step (Schoenfeld, 2011a).

Figure 1. Decision Tree Within a Lesson

When the teacher has the resources and time to establish high-quality goals, and establishes consistent instructional routines that are conducive to attaining the goals, this process works
well. Proponents of formative assessments would argue that assessment should reside within this process, not after this process (Black & Wiliam, 2009). The decisions made throughout the process influence outcomes and at times, alter the decision tree when they do not correspond well with the context or goals. It is important to understand this process within each learning situation, in order to explain individual teacher’s subjective valuation of alternative plans (Schoenfeld, 2011a). In other words, teachers place a value on their options before making a decision, which has a profound effect on the outcome (Schoenfeld, 2011a). It becomes imperative for teachers to be cognizant of this process, be conscious of their orientation, and understand the impacts on their practice (Schoenfeld, 2011a).

The Role of Decision Making.

As noted previously, modern classrooms have a variety of instructional and assessment resources to utilize within the decision-making process. Within each assessment decision, a path towards one instructional goal or a different instructional goal becomes activated. Many teachers’ knowledge and beliefs are often in synch with constructivist theories of learning but their assessment practices often reflect behaviorist modes of assessment (McMillan, 2003; Schoenfeld, 2013). Theorists have thought of learning through different lenses. The behaviorists focused on observable performances, such as recalling facts and defining terms; the cognitive theorists emphasized how learners acquire knowledge and make it meaningful through concept formation and problem solving; and the constructivists emphasized learning as a multi-sensory approach, whereby the learner is an active participant constructing knowledge through experiences within their environment (Ertmer & Newby, 1993). Before authentic assessments can occur, educators should have an understanding of how the learners are processing and acquiring knowledge. Within this alignment, teachers understand the instructional and
assessment decisions that support how learning occurs, how the transfer of knowledge occurs, and which factors influence learning (Ertmer & Newby, 1993).

Educators know the difficult realization of translating theories about learning into practical applications and also, matching theories to desired learning outcomes (Ertmer & Newby, 1993). Through studying classroom assessment decisions, McMillan (2003) sought to form a “basis for theoretical development of measurement in the classroom” (p. 35). Effective teachers are cognizant of monitoring the complex characteristics of student learning and understand how to interpret their understanding within the process of assessment (McMillan, 2003). The direction of these interpretations is made through a decision-making process that results from the interplay of teachers’ beliefs, external pressures, and the context of their classrooms, as shown in Figure 2 (McMillan, 2003).

The teachers’ beliefs include pedagogical philosophies, which can be in conflict with the external pressures of standardized testing as they try to strike a balance between the two (McMillan, 2003). Alternatively, their beliefs may gravitate towards trying to motivate students and their assessment practices may reflect leniencies not equal to students’ progress (McMillan, 2003). Both of these scenarios will produce different results. Additionally, their assessment practices may be altered to accommodate for the school’s assessment culture or context of their classroom (McMillan, 2003).

Connection to Inquiry and Study.

There have been twenty years of reforms and yet, issues of the assessment process, validity, and fairness still persist. Teachers’ assessment practices remain balanced between the constraints of their own beliefs and the external pressures of mandated standardized testing (McMillan, 2003; Schoenfeld, 2011a). Conducting data from current teachers can uncover new
connections and relationships within their assessment decision making process. Will the participants echo previous beliefs, concerns, and practices or will there be evidence of a paradigm shift in the assessment culture of the classroom? There needs to be a concerted effort to understand the elements of teachers’ knowledge and beliefs and acknowledge their combined influence on teachers’ decision making rationale for assessment practices (McMillan, 2003; Schoenfeld, 2011a).

**Figure 2. The Influences of Decision-Making**

(adapted from McMillian, 2003)
Chapter II Literature Review

Introduction

There are important factors to examine and consider within the scholarly literature, in order to, thoroughly explore teachers’ instructional decisions and use of assessments. The current debate is determining which path educators should take. One path could be to eliminate or improve outdated modes of standardized testing and another path is to use all testing in a formative manner, with an increased use of formative assessments. The differences of opinions between policy makers and measurement specialists varies and the educational community has had to adjust within these changing opinions. The purpose of this study is to consider the teachers’ view of the situation and to add their voice to the conversation. The teachers are the individuals who are directly responsible for administering and monitoring all forms of assessments within their classrooms. How does their past experience effect their present uses of assessments and what factors and influences might have an impact on their future uses of assessments? Of particular interest, is how and why teachers choose to implement particular models and methods within their instructional decision making and assessment practice.

The following review will first examine scholarly literature studying the broad issues and effective purposes of assessments and then, examine the development of formative assessment. What important analyses have the experts contributed to our understanding of assessment and how does this relate to teachers’ instructional decision making and goals? Additionally, how have these analyses contributed to our understanding of teachers’ views and perceptions of assessments? The second section will examine the importance of classroom and school contexts and its relationship to instructional decision making and practices. How does the assessment culture of a school influence perceptions and affect the classroom use of assessments? Also, is
there a connection to the sensitive issues that affect the cultural and equity implications of past and current assessments? The third section will consider the relationship of research theory, practice, and teachers’ knowledge of assessment. How is this relationship perceived by both scholars and practitioners? Additionally, does including teacher input into the formation of assessment practices affect the teachers’ positive development and use of assessments? Lastly to be considered, is the importance of counterarguments and cautions when discussing the use of assessments. There are lessons to be considered from both sides of the argument supporting changes in assessment practices. Is there a way to incorporate the practical need for accountability and the varied processes of student learning?

**The Purpose of Assessment**

Prior to the era of mandated standardized testing, student evaluation received less attention than other elements of education and its power to affect student achievement was rarely discussed (Crooks, 1988). However, since the early calls for better assessment models were first published, many scholars tried to define the purpose of assessment. Recent perspectives about assessment’s purposes have evolved from past theories of learning and psychological development. One modern perspective distilled the purposes of assessment into three categories, in order to clarify how assessments have been used and misused (Newton, 2007). Assessment was defined as a means to derive judgments that were standards-referenced, such as, student monitoring and district resource allocation; were a support for decisions about performance levels, placement, and selection; and were used to produce an impact for students, such as motivation and social monitoring (Newton, 2007). These categories could be utilized in more general terms or in more specific terms, depending on their assessment purposes. Importantly, it was proposed that these categories have clear distinctions and intended purposes, and be properly
matched to their purpose (Newton, 2007). Additionally, experts suggested distinctions between utilizing large-scale assessments versus classroom assessments, such as, student performance versus how students are grasping learning objectives (Brookhart, 2003).

Assessment scholars also considered assessment’s relationship within teachers’ views of learning, and distinguished between two distinct interpretations and purposes of assessment as a support to learning. One interpretation, described as convergent teacher assessment, centered on the teacher’s goal and assessment’s purpose to ascertain if students know the content material (Pryor & Torrance, 1998). This behaviorist framework had an emphasis towards linear, predetermined learning goals and expectations (Pryor & Torrance, 1998). Divergent teacher assessment was described as an alternative purpose of assessment. In this model, the teacher made efforts to discover what the students understood at each moment in time and used flexible planning, descriptive feedback, and a more constructivist theory of learning (Pryor & Torrance, 1998). Teacher and student interactions were thought to become clear, complex interplays of learning, motivation, and emerging positive interactions (Pryor & Torrance, 1998). Teachers utilized time to reflect how they interacted in the learning situations and added the purpose of helping students become self-reflective, as well (Pryor & Torrance, 1998). In time, educators felt divergent assessment leaned more towards formative assessment models and convergent assessment more or less aligned with summative assessment (Pryor & Torrance, 1998).

More distinctions of summative and formative assessment began to emerge and became the impetus for new levels of understanding the purposes of assessment. The purpose of a summative assessment is evaluating the value or competence of a student’s individual performance after the lesson is completed (Newton, 2007). It is the summation of learning. Often summative assessment is designed by external testing services and measured through grading
mechanisms and data sets. Before research on assessments began to have a positive impact on teacher perceptions of assessment, many teachers felt assessments were meant for conveying information to external audiences and rarely, to provide evidence of how students learn (Delandshere & Jones, 1999). Teachers felt this paralyzed their efforts to extend beyond the traditional forms of assessment (Delandshere & Jones, 1999). Teachers viewed assessments as a means to show what students knew or did not know (Delandshere & Jones, 1999). Alternatively, formative assessment became a means to understanding student progress during learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Because this alternate view of assessment’s purpose was dependent on the instructional decisions a teacher made throughout the lesson, its utility came into question. Its development needed further explanation to the assessment community and further evidence of its purposes and efficacy.

**The Development of Formative Assessment.**

Black and Wiliam (1998), the seminal authors who articulated the need, purpose, and benefits of formative assessment, developed their thoughts and collected evidence over time. Black and Wiliam (1998) noted how formative assessment created noticeable academic gains for low achieving students and helped narrow the gap between students. By using formative assessment, teachers could help students engage in the process of learning and recognize elements of the students’ progress towards understanding. However, using assessment formatively did not automatically fit into the usual classroom routines and summative assessments remained the dominant form of assessment. Today, assessments can be administered before, during, and/or after instruction has been implemented. This was not always the case before 1998 when Black and Wiliam set out to show that assessing students prior to and during the instructional process provided the most effective student learning in their article, “Inside the
Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment.” Their groundbreaking article did not necessarily uncover something new but did revive important concepts about learning and assessment that had been ignored within many classrooms. Of importance was the authors previous concerns about the validity and reliability of assessment, especially when students misunderstood or misinterpreted test questions (Wiliam & Black, 1996).

Black and Wiliam (1998) had long proposed that learning in the classroom was driven by meaningful interactions between teachers and students. Only when teachers knew specifically how students were faring, could teachers adapt to the students’ needs (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Additionally, teachers needed to make qualitative instructional and assessment judgments (McMillan, 2003) that were multidimensional and not just sequential, such as testing for units of skills (Sadler, 1989). How best to accomplish this necessary feat was not an easy or agreed upon process. Of importance, was how the teacher chose to enact a more supportive role, frame his or her pedagogical philosophy, and utilize informative feedback. The teacher should be learning about the students from the students’ responses and engaged in interpretive listening (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Formative assessment refocused the importance of interactions between teachers and students, the influences of feedback on cognition, and the student’s role in learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009). It also emphasized the decisions made by the teacher, when capitalizing on the context of the classroom situation and the key interactive moments for learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009). In these interactive components of formative assessments, teachers have key opportunities to make pivotal instructional decisions (see Figure 3). The decision process becomes an interplay of the goals of the lesson, the orientation of the teacher’s view of the lesson and students, and the resources at hand to carry out the decisions (Schoenfeld, 2011a). These important interactions and instructional decisions, can be missed in the hectic environment of the
modern classroom, unless there is a deliberate plan to incorporate particular assessment practices.

**Figure 3: Opportunities for Key Interactive Moments and Instructional Decisions**

(Adapted from Black & Wiliam, 2009)

Of interest to this study, was the added component of instructional goal making. Do current teachers rely solely on external curriculum and instructional goals or do they tailor their instructional goals, as needed? This distinction could help illustrate the current assessment philosophy within the climate of mandated standardized testing and if there is a noticeable change in assessment practices. Additionally, was the question of shifting goal making within classrooms as schools prepared to take mandated standardized tests. Another question to ask was, do teachers have different types of goals before the test taking periods and then, after the tests are completed (Polly, Wang, McGee, Lambert, Martin, & Pugalee, 2014! Teachers are caught within the tension of accountability standards and alternative assessment philosophies
(Irving, Harris, & Peterson, 2011). How each teacher addresses the purpose of assessment and makes assessment and instructional decisions could be connected to how he or she perceives assessment.

**Teachers’ Perceptions of Assessment.**

Research has shown there are conflicting opinions about the direction of assessment usage within K-12 education. School administrators have incorporated large-scale standardized assessments as the norm for the past twenty years and now, a shift is beginning to adjust this thinking. There are calls to incorporate more formative thinking into teachers’ practice but there is evidence that teachers often have limited knowledge or disparate ideas of formative assessments (Trauth-Nare & Buck, 2011). Most teachers have little assessment training and often base their attitudes on their personal experiences with assessment as students themselves (Quilter & Gallini, 2000). Researchers have found that most teachers lean towards standardized testing methods in their classroom practice and few towards alternative forms of testing (Quilter & Gallini, 2000). The interesting fact that teachers’ attitudes with all forms of assessment were influenced more from their own personal experiences, or affective variables, than from their professional development, or cognitive variables, is key (Quilter & Gallini, 2000).

Also, it has been shown that teachers’ grading and assessment practices can be influenced away from formative assessments by class size, school size, and subject area (Duncan & Noonan, 2007). There seems to be a pattern of assessment use concentrated on traditional summative paper and pencil assessments, possibly for their time-saving elements, familiarity of use, or ease of grading. This is an interesting phenomenon as many educators easily recollect the unfair grading-practices of their youth (Guskey, 2006). These negative memories, many from their college years, can linger into adulthood and influence how teachers utilize assessment and
so, should also be addressed in conversations about understanding assessment uses (Guskey, 2006). This issue can carry over into teacher education programs. Bonner and Chen (2009) found that pre-service teachers view assessments and grades as necessary and found they had a tendency to view grades as a management tool. The teacher candidates had a positive view of constructivist approaches but thought of assessment in traditional approaches (Bonner & Chen, 2009). Educators may tell pre-service teachers the benefits of assessment for learning, but simultaneously, are perpetuating the grade-only culture themselves (Mitton-Kukner, Munroe, & Graham, 2015). This disconnect undermines future changes in attitudes towards grades and testing (Mitton-Kukner et al., 2015). However, there must be a balance within assessment practices and teachers’ input to the conversation could be invaluable.

In several cases, even when teachers believed assessments other than standardized assessments were important, they usually did not use them (Brookhart, 2004). In other instances, teachers used non-graded formative assessments only 12% of the time throughout the year and 25% of the time used graded assessments during instruction (Frey & Schmitt, 2010). Curiously, one study noted teachers changing their perspectives towards assessments before and after high-stress testing periods and the researchers suggested interviewing teachers, multiple times during a school year (Polly et al., 2014). Giving teachers opportunities to articulate their views may help shed some light on why they held certain perceptions and used certain assessment practices.

When analyzing how educators think about their pedagogy, Olafson, Schraw, and Vander Veldt (2010) saw a correlation between teachers’ epistemological and ontological world views. The epistemological view refers to one’s collective beliefs about knowledge acquisition and the ontological view refers to collective beliefs about reality and being (Olafson, Schraw, & Vander Veldt, 2010). These world views work in tandem and become a determining factor of a teacher’s
view of pedagogy and student learning (Olafson et al., 2010). Teachers with more sophisticated world views are more likely to emphasize higher-order thinking in their instruction and assessments, and teachers with less sophisticated world views are more likely to emphasize traditional student-testing and mastery of basic concepts (Olafson et al., 2010). However, it has also been noted that teachers may espouse a more sophisticated view but their actual practices differ in the execution of lessons and use of assessments (Olafson et al., 2010). There is a need for more investigation analyzing how teachers view themselves, their students, and this complex relationship of how they make decisions for instruction and assessments (Olafson et al., 2010).

As research focuses primarily on large-scale test development, there continues to be a research gap in assessment, which keeps classroom assessment out of balance (Frey & Schmitt, 2010). Teachers’ tensions between students’ instructional needs and external calls for data have resulted in conflicting assessment practices (Sharkey & Murnane, 2006; Volante, Beckett, Reid, & Drake, 2010). This world view is part of a teacher’s orientation towards different pedagogical practices and has more influence on assessment practices than teachers’ years of experience (Frey & Schmitt, 2010). Some teachers find certain forms of formative assessment more manageable in their classrooms than other forms and want professional development to assist them (Sachs, 2012; Volante et al., 2010). Groups of teachers can have wide ranging and divergent views on formative assessments and so, only a minority of teachers might use them effectively (Sharkey & Murnane, 2006). Teachers see the need for a coherent assessment and evaluation processes that addresses their concerns before becoming more responsible for formative assessments in their classrooms (Sharkey & Murnane, 2006; Volante et al., 2010). It is not surprising that many teachers want to be convinced of the assessments worth before investing time and energy into them.
When too many reforms are mandated from the administration, there becomes a resistance to change and distrust of new methods, including the use of formative assessments (Valli & Buese, 2007). Valli and Buese (2007) viewed the changing role of teachers caught up in high-stakes testing as losing an instructional edge to powerlessness and resistance. Benchmark testing has become a new way to bridge the summative-formative assessment debate and is a good example of this trend. This type of testing is meant to be more frequent and to aid students’ future achievement on mandated standardized tests. Abrams, McMillan, and Wetzel (2015) reported mixed results on their usage and mixed positive support by teachers. Success was dependent on teacher training, the quality of the tests, and teachers’ positive views of the tests’ efficacy (Abrams, McMillan, & Wetzel, 2015). In one study, a district actually reported that the teachers’ own testing was 60% more revealing of students’ abilities than the district’s benchmark tests (Abrams et al., 2015). The researchers also saw the value of including teachers in the test development process. The teachers gave curricular input and became invested into the assessments’ future support (Abrams et al., 2015).

In some cases, teachers’ perceptions and value for various assessment methods are influenced by their own understanding of assessment’s efficacy (Yan & Cheng, 2015). The teachers who see formative assessments as an add-on to instruction, as opposed to integrating the assessment, usually stay with traditional, teacher directed, drill and practice, summative assessment (Yan & Cheng, 2015). Additionally, teachers with higher self-efficacy and a desire to expand their knowledge, are more likely to use formative assessment (Yan & Cheng, 2015). There remains a need for further inquiry into the reasoning behind teachers not using formative assessment, even when they saw the efficacy of doing so. When teachers understand how integrated assessment can be, there is a higher comfort level for incorporating these methods into
their instruction (Yan & Cheng, 2015). First, researchers need to understand more clearly how teachers develop their instructional goals and form their orientations towards using assessments before they can begin to make changes.

**Summary.**

Assessment practices rely on teachers’ knowledge of assessment purposes and their perceptions of assessment practices. Teachers can view time analyzing student data, from various assessments, as helpful and collaborative or as interrupting the flow of instruction and intrusive administrative supervision (Valli & Buese, 2007). Each teacher has a particular view and orientation towards certain components of instruction and assessment, which will influence their instructional goals, decisions, and assessment practices (Schoenfeld, 2011a). Teachers may perceive knowledge of the benefits of certain assessments, but may not have the confidence to create their own assessment environment and continue to use past practices (Sach, 2012). Studies have shown that teachers often have a constructivist view of learning but use a traditional, behaviorist mode of assessments. There may be correlations between teachers’ years of experience, the grade levels they teach, and their actual uses of alternative and formative assessments, but it is not exclusively conclusive (Sachs, 2012).

By uncovering the reasoning and belief structures behind teachers’ decision making when they choose to implement various forms of assessment, professional development can be tailored to address knowledge gaps and concerns (Frey & Schmitt, 2010). These components within teacher perceptions might also be mitigated through understanding the context of the school and the assessment culture. These influences outside of the classroom can have a profound effect on teachers’ orientations toward assessment and the assessment culture they form inside the classroom. Additionally, the assessment culture can influence the validity and reliability of the
assessment tools chosen, which may alter test fairness and bring to light cultural and equity implications.

**The Role of Context and the Resources Available**

There is little argument that different schools across the country have variations in geographical demographics, student demographics, school size, financial support, and quality professional education. These aspects make up the school context and often dictate the resources that are available to administrators, teachers, and students. The school context also has an influence on the school’s assessment culture. Research has shown that the assessment culture plays a major role in setting the tone for how schools support various instructional and assessment philosophies (Klinger & Rogers, 2011). It is of great importance to ask teachers which of these aspects they view becomes the most important for influencing their assessment practices. Additionally, it is important to ask teachers how they consider the assessment culture when they address cultural and equity concerns when forming their assessment practices.

**Noting the Assessment Culture.**

There is a context to every situation. In tandem with studying the perceptions involved in teachers’ thinking, there must also be an understanding of the assessment cultures in schools and classrooms and how they guide assessment practices. Stiggins and Conklin (1992) noted this as the assessment environment, which are structured around the following factors:

1. Assessment purposes
2. Assessment methodologies, as each is applied to assessing achievement, affect, and ability
3. Criteria used in selecting the assessment method
4. Quality of assessments
5. Feedback

6. The teacher as assessor: background, time expenditure and personal/professional characteristics

7. The teacher’s perception of the students

8. The assessment-policy environment (p.80)

Teachers come from various assessment backgrounds, vary their use of assessments, clarify learning targets for students differently, and manifest different views of assessments in their practice (Stiggins & Conklin, 1992). These differences can be combined into a unified assessment environment when the teachers are informed, assessments are relevant, and teachers use assessments as their purposes were intended (Stiggins & Conklin, 1992). In some schools, teachers may have an understanding of how various assessments are meant to enhance learning within the classroom, but the assessment culture of the school dictates a different philosophy. In other schools, teachers are resistant to changing past practices and ignore administrative attempts to implement new forms of assessment (Valli & Buese, 2007).

When teachers begin to adopt new assessment models and philosophies, they may find their practices easily revert back to former practices (Davis & Neitzel, 2011). A school can find a way of changing its assessment environment, in which the teachers relinquished past practices, through a process of teacher reflection and professional development (Davis & Neitzel, 2011). Additionally, a school assessment culture controlled by the administration and parents, also has to discontinue competing assessment goals and unify the purposes of the school’s assessment objectives (Davis & Neitzel, 2011). Creating and sustaining a positive assessment culture is not a simple process of making recommendations and following the latest reform trends (Robinson, Myran, Strauss, & Reed, 2014). Teachers may plan to use strategies put forth by experts but their
assessment understanding, the school’s support, and planning time may not be in synchrony with researchers recommended use of assessments (Duncan & Noonan, 2007; McMillan, 2003; Robinson et al., 2014).

Examining past assessment practices can uncover how teachers’ views, beliefs, and orientations remain under the surface regardless of the schools required assessment choices (Sachs, 2012). Changing these beliefs to incorporate positive views towards assessment practices that work well with all children require an additional assessment knowledge component. Ensuring that teachers have in-depth pedagogical knowledge creates assessment practices that are deep rather than superficial (Sachs, 2012). Robinson, Myran, Strauss, and Reed (2014) showed the positive results of lengthy professional development meetings as key to teachers gathering to overcome previous experiences, discuss beliefs, share ideas, be reflective, and prioritize future strategies for implementing assessments formatively. This input to reflect on and revise practices takes time but teachers often plan to continue the new ideas when they realize noticeable positive gains in student learning (Guskey, 2002; Robinson et al., 2014).

All teacher learning and reflection does not have to occur in formal settings. A professional learning culture can support informal and continuous professional discourse on assessment. Through this supportive environment, teachers can become part of an ongoing process working towards a unified understanding of assessment that is effective and productive and is incorporated into the school’s mission, traditions, and organizational arrangement (Jurasaite-Harbison & Rex, 2010). Positive changes develop when there is a progressive assessment ethos within a school, especially when there is teacher cooperation and a broad repertoire of assessment models (Howley et al., 2013). This positive culture may even convert opposing teachers through internal professional development organized by knowledgeable
teacher leaders (Howley et al., 2013). When teachers have the opportunity to participate in teacher education, they often exceed their own knowledge and experiences to support an assessment culture that fits the needs of their students and school (Howley et al., 2013). Teachers may also cultivate assessment knowledge which emanates from the contextual and cultural strengths of their students and use these opportunities to authentically assess the students’ progress (Howley et al., 2013). This enhanced knowledge could become a basis to develop further assessment practices that are culturally fair and equitable for all students.

**Cultural and Equity Implications.**

Educators have not found a simple solution to implementing assessment models that address all of the nuances within student achievement. Additionally, researchers and teachers have had to consider the cultural and equity implications of modern assessment design and implementation. What seems appropriate for one group of students may not be equally appropriate for another group of students. Keeping cultural and equity implications in the forefront has become paramount for changing the mindset of school assessment practices and improving opportunities for student progress and achievement. It has been shown that teachers have concerns about their knowledge and understanding of assessment practices (Stiggins & Conklin, 1992) and often, revert back to the assessment models they have felt most comfortable with (Quilter & Gallini, 2000). Does this effect teachers’ ability to make valid decisions about assessment models and inferences about student learning? When these issues are coupled with cultural and equity disparities, then students are destined to feel the negative impacts.

In the past, there has been a clear correlation between the socioeconomic status of students and lower standardized test scores (Popham, 2007). One reasoning for this fact could be a disconnect of these tests to the curriculum being presented, or test insensitivity (Popham,
If students also have a deficit in their cultural capital, then they may not have the common knowledge needed to compensate and be successful (Yosso, 2005). Popham (2007) places the responsibility to check the sensitivity of the tests used in schools, directly on the schools and teachers. Popham (2007) suggests assessing students more formatively and considering ways to compensate for assessment theory that is incongruous with classroom practices.

There has been a long-standing view regarding the negative effects of grade-only marking systems, and yet, they still exist. At-risk students are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of grade-only marking and often benefit from strategies that are formative (Rieg, 2007). The process of convincing teachers to change their practices, needs firstly to involve teachers reflecting on the effectiveness of their present assessment system, create active roles for students in the assessment process, and then, incorporate input from both teachers and students (Rieg, 2007). This assessment philosophy supports opportunities for students to be successful and reduced the finite grading principles of the past. As a result, students can begin to participate in the learning process (Rieg, 2007). It is important to ascertain how teachers’ view these issues in the current assessment environment and if they are adapting in similar or different ways. In the past, most teacher preparation programs have not prepared pre-service teachers in how to develop and align assessments to their instruction (Stiggins & Conklin, 1992) and current assessment training should prepare teachers more thoroughly (Frey & Schmitt, 2010). We must contemplate the fact that some at-risk students are kept at-risk through our schools continued out dated assessment policies that do not optimize the same positive gains as more progressive assessments (Rieg, 2007).

Teachers can provide the instructional decisions, academic support, and assessment systems needed to produce end results educators dream of for students without equitable
educational conditions (Reig, 2007) by changing culturally in-sensitive assessment practices (Popham, 2007). However, there also has to be changes in teachers’ general assessment practices. Utilizing constructivist learning theory, which integrates many of the formative assessment principles supported by responsive assessment practices, can become a framework for innovative ways to improve student achievement. There has been evidence that these changes can occur when the relationships of teacher input in the planning and designing of assessments are connected to their actual classroom assessment practices. Some schools and teachers may not be cognizant of their misunderstandings of cultural disparities and academic inequities.

Professional development that encourages teachers to use reflective processes to understand their own practices and views on learning, help teachers understand their use of assessment (Buck & Trauth-Nare, 2009; Trauth-Nare & Buck, 2011). Teachers can be asked to reflect on the impacts, implications, and barriers to their use of assessments. Then, they can proceed through a process of reviewing, utilizing, and reflecting on their attempts of using various assessments (Buck & Trauth-Nare, 2009). The teachers’ orientation towards an equitable tone can positively guide the instructional goals and decision making.

**Summary.**

The importance of a school’s context is valued because of its influence on the resources available to teachers and the assessment culture of the school. The elements of the school’s mission, assessment policies, assessment selection, and teacher support are all resources that support the assessment culture. The direction of these elements sets the tone for assessment goals, cultural acknowledgements, and equity considerations. How teachers follow through within their assessment practices may or may not be in synch with the assessment culture, but will usually be aligned with their orientations, beliefs, and past experiences (Quilter & Gallini,
Teachers may plan for innovative practices but often revert back to past practices (Davis & Neitzel, 2011). Through a supportive environment that supports both formal professional development (Robison et al., 2014) and an ongoing informal professional discourse conferring on the progress of the assessment process (Jurasaitė-Harbison & Rex, 2010), teachers can gather together to share experiences, beliefs, and strategies for improving practices (Robison et al., 2014).

When there is a progressive assessment ethos that incorporates a broad repertoire of assessment models, there are more opportunities to address the needs of all the students in the classroom and the issues of cultural and academic inequalities can be minimized (Howley et al., 2013). Finding the appropriate match of the curriculum and subsequent assessments refers to the test sensitivity and schools have the responsibility to consider this match (Popham, 2007). Assessment practices also rely on a foundation of assessment and learning theory to ground the principles within sound research. The relationship between research theory and practice should be examined in the context of assessment practices because at times, there have been significantly divergent views.

**Research Theory and Practice**

Many years of unsuccessful reforms have created a persistent tension in the educational field between theory and practice. Various assessment theories, measurement theories, and taxonomies of outcomes were presented as answers to the ailing education system. Even when scholars presented findings with exciting conclusions and advice for schools and teachers’ practice, that advice was often perceived as far removed from what teachers considered practical. Teachers rarely embraced new ideas that were presented for them to interpret and translate into everyday practice (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Noticeably absent have been references to teachers’
views in the assessment discussion. Their missing voices need to be heard and are highly relevant to the conversation (Sach, 2012).

In many cases, educational theories have been disjointed and ill-fitted to take on the multi-dimensional issues of education (Schwab, 1969). Schools and their many components, which include social structures, political structures, knowledge, values, and relationships between these components, require more than one theory to encapsulate them (Schwab, 1969). Educational theories that claim to encompass universal ideas cannot be easily applied to the ever-changing environment of schools (Schwab, 1969). These theories need to have flexibility and understand what Schwab (1969) calls the practical, something that is aware of changing circumstances and grounded in the context of the situation. In this thought process, theory is controlled by rigid principles searching for a problem, but within the practical, there is a search for solutions (Schwab, 1969). Though not all scholars would agree with Schwab’s distinctions of theory and the practical, this outlook is relevant today when considering theories of assessment. Teachers need to see a theory’s relevancy to their practice and feel comfortable incorporating its principles into their instruction.

When examining the relationship between theory and practice, it is also important to consider the relationship between researchers and practitioners. Researchers may deem certain methods and strategies effective for classroom use, but teachers often feel they are unrealistic and contradictory (Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). Additionally, school leaders and teachers often lack confidence that research can improve educational practice and view most research as not well oriented towards practice (Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). Often new research is not made known outside of the research community and the findings are not always applicable to practice (Vanderlinde & van Braak’s, 2010). However, when communication and understanding
is improved, there can be opportunities for collaborative projects between practitioners and scholars (Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). This collaboration can be a great asset for studying the conflicting theories in education and provide much needed data. Teacher input helps to ground the research in the realities of actual classrooms and new theories help to create teacher awareness for change. Research that unifies theory and practice is more likely to convince teachers to make positive changes in their practices.

**Unifying Assessment Theory and Practice.**

The development of assessment theories was an opportunity to unify the diverse practices and narrow the approaches teachers had taken towards instructional, assessment, and learning theory (Harlen, 2007). There had been a strong argument for outlining what constitutes effective criteria when using assessments within the classroom, as teachers make decisions everyday about which to use (Harlen, 2007). If teachers do not understand how to implement an assessment in a correct manner, then they have changed the purpose of that assessment (Harlen, 2007). It has been difficult for many teachers to implement new assessments because of uncertainty of their validity and consistency of results towards student achievement (Harlen, 2007). For example, in the past, measurement specialists have tried to separate assessment and instruction (Brookhart, 2003). Following this assessment principle, both large scale assessments and classroom assessments are implemented similarly, such as, after the instruction ends, the assessment follows, and then, the class moves on to another topic, chapter, or grade level. When viewing these two types of assessments as separate entities, then the purposes and principles of use changes (Brookhart, 2003). However, many schools’ classroom assessments do not match their theory to practice, but transfer the psychometric theory from the large-scale assessments into the classroom assessments and lose the proposed benefits of classroom assessments (Brookhart,
2003). There becomes a disconnect between the actual practices and new assessment theories. By clarifying the important points of assessments and unifying the broad approaches into theories that can be applied to practice, then school administrators and teachers have a higher probability of using new assessments as their purpose was intended.

A promising theory of practice in of itself, is not convincing enough to gain teachers confidence and sustain classroom use (Guskey, 2002). It is not always clear when teachers make permanent shifts in their thinking. Catalyst for changes in teachers’ practices and beliefs occur more readily when research for new practices include teacher involvement, support for successful implementation, and assessment methods that evidence changes in learning outcomes (Guskey, 2002). Different assessments yield evidence for different purposes and can have different interpretations. Teachers’ actions with this evidence can become diagnostic, informative, or punitive for students (Wiliam & Black, 1996). In order to understand better when and where to use specific assessments, there first must be an understanding of the theories supporting the assessments. It is clear that some assessment practices are more effective than others. Teachers work with students every day and have valid experiences that can contribute to this understanding. It is also important to note how this understanding relates to issues of equitable assessment standards and the relevance of cultural and language sensitivity in assessment uses. Would teachers’ views on these issues bring about a richer conversation or cloud the conversation with negative perceptions? The relationship of theory and practice becomes more relevant with controversial perspectives.

**The Relationship of Teacher Input and Assessment Practice.**

Even though progressive assessment knowledge is available, these assessment practices are not easily embraced. Striving for lasting change requires a balance between the participants’
previous views and concerns, and accepting new ideas. When researchers and assessment specialists give credence to teachers’ views of assessments in their schools and classrooms, they are providing an opportunity for teachers to become part of a collaborative effort and learning process. This collaboration becomes meaningful to the participants and helps provide a vested interest in the process’ outcome.

There has been extensive evidence of student achievement that supports the use of formative assessment and also evidence that teachers continue to bypass these assessments for traditional assessment models (Black et al., 2004). When teachers are given an opportunity to take a closer look at their own assessment practices through a process of reflection within a collaborative process, they often begin to see more than their own perspectives (Black et al., 2004). Through a supportive environment, teachers can form collaborative groups, voice their concerns, contribute ideas, and also, find their own incremental ways to make rewarding changes (Black et al., 2004). Teachers fears and concerns can be addressed and their input valued. Success with one group of teachers sharing their experiences and expertise with others can become the catalyst for supporting colleagues interested in doing the same (Black et al., 2004).

Teachers can participate in action research investigating relevant topics in their classroom, which also values their input as scholar-practitioners (Torrance & Pryor, 2001). In particular, with assessment inquiry, researchers can help guide teachers to analyze their present practices, collect exploratory data, and then, begin to examine their own personal theories on learning and assessment (Torrance & Pryor, 2001). The teacher researchers can also be guided on how to conceptualize the concepts under their investigation and integrate the new ideas into action (Torrance & Pryor, 2001). Torrance and Pryor (2001) showed the value of teachers being
involved in the process of discovering relevant approaches and contributing their own input and study versus just simply giving recommendations to teachers of what they should do. One group of researchers readily admitted an error in judgment, not taking teacher input under consideration, when they designed a protocol for using embedded formative assessments. Brandon, Young, Shavelson, Jones, Ayala, Ruiz-Primo, and Yin (2008) organized a multi-tiered study with curriculum developers, assessment developers, and teachers to develop effective embedded science assessments. Of importance was what the researchers learned. They realized they were imposing their expertise onto the teachers and neglected to include teacher input into their design phases. It only became apparent to the researchers in the piloting phase when assessments were too long and disconnected that they realized their oversight (Brandon et al., 2008). After the glitches were resolved, positive outcomes occurred that supported the study’s design plan and purpose. The project became successful because firstly, there evolved an understanding of each members’ expertise and valid contribution during the design phase, and secondly, there was an appreciation for time to collaborate, share knowledge, and work out the assessment design in training sessions (Brandon et al., 2008). The researchers realized that classroom environments cannot be generalized, instead, they have unique characteristics understood by the teachers working within those contexts (Brandon et al., 2008). Also, to be considered is the context of school environment and student population to ensure that the assessments utilized are culturally sensitive and are equitable in their design and expectations.

Summary.

There is a connection between assessment theory and assessment practice. Under debate has been the quality of that connection. Theorists know their work should be unified with practice but have not always been successful doing so. Sometimes the theories are ill-fitted and
disjointed (Schwab, 1969) and other times they disregard the importance of teacher perceptions, teacher input (Brandon et al., 2008), and the importance of cultural and equity implications. Teachers are not easily convinced of the efficacy of new theories and methods until they see valid evidence of student progress (Guskey, 2002). However, if teachers are involved in the inquiry process, they are more likely to have a vested interest in the process’ outcome (Torrance & Pryor, 2001).

Teachers can be encouraged to participate as scholar-practitioners and expand professional development to include researcher and teacher collaborations. They can examine their instructional goal and decision making, understand the origins of their orientations to certain pedagogical practices, and navigate the assessment culture and resources of their school. Teachers and researchers can have differences in their interpretations of assessment theories and models but through the inquiry process can come to agree on basic tenets, especially if there is evidence of improvement in student achievement (Buck & Trauth-Nare, 2009; Trauth-Nare & Buck, 2011). These points are valid for this study as well. The purpose of the study is to investigate and include teachers’ perceptions and views and then, apply them to future assessment processes. However, it is also of importance to include the counterarguments and cautions for implementing change in this present testing environment. No one assessment process has proven to encompass all concerns pertinent to learning and achievement, and so, being aware of the counterarguments enhances the testing of new concepts and ideas.

**Counterarguments and Cautions**

Counterarguments provide a fuller picture of theory and practice and provide an impetus to dig deeper into the research, in order to study the topic from many angles. Even though this study intends to focus on teachers’ experiences with all assessments, there will be a focus on
their use of formative assessment. There is a need to revisit why formative assessment practice still is not fully integrated as a norm in the nation’s classrooms. The disconnect between what scholars recommend and actual teachers’ practice remains. Alternative and/or negative assertions of formative assessments validity must be addressed and countered, whenever possible, with quality data. Will the participants of the study echo these counterarguments as proof of their arguments?

Brown, Andrade, and Chen (2015) proposed the potential inaccuracies of students conducting self-assessments, a central component of formative assessment, and cautioned against elevating these assessments over summative metrics. Burgess, Roberts, Black, and Mellis (2013) also cautioned that using peer-feedback requires advanced discussions on how to use a positive critique method. The teachers in a similar study by Volante and Beckett (2011) also felt that peer- and self-assessments lack the proper validity to be essential for students’ grades. However, the same teachers valued the study’s varied perspectives on the subject and were convinced to continue using these formative assessment strategies (Volante & Beckett, 2011).

Additionally, Ayala, Shavelson, Ruiz-Primo, Brandon, Yin, Furtak, Young, and Tomita (2008) noted that more evidence is needed to confirm that an instructional philosophy that embeds assessments actually provides opportunities to check for student understanding. Questions were raised about the quantity and frequency of formative assessments for best practices, but still, the researchers and participants saw positive student learning through the overall process of using formative assessments (Ayala, Shavelson, Ruiz-Primo, Brandon, Yin, Furtak, Young, & Tomita, 2008). Black, Harrison, Hodgen, Marshall, & Marshal (2010) added the importance of developing assessment systems that had sufficient rigor and validity, as well as being supportive of quality learning practices. Brookhart (2011) documented how successful
high school students valued both formative and summative assessment, each had its own value to their learning process. Finally, assessment experts, Chudowsky and Pellegrino (2003), suggested there should be a way to have large-scale assessments to support learning. However, they also recognized that this difficult task must start with questions concerning what the assessment will test for (Chudowsky & Pellegrino, 2003).

**Summary.**

Several studies and their overall concern or counterarguments were presented. Each has a valid point that should be addressed and not discounted. Will participants in this study raise similar points of view? The use of formative assessment continues to be praised and its principles are occasionally applied to the use of summative assessment, but not as frequently as to be efficacious overall (Hoover & Abrams, 2013). Further research, such as this study, should analyze all points of view to conduct data collection that can inform assessment practices and guide policy with accuracy.

**Literature Review Summary**

The purpose of this study is to inquire and explore the experiences and preferred formative assessment models, methods, and strategies of elementary school teachers, and how this may affect their use of the assessments. The research literature supports the need to study teachers’ perspectives and the context in which these perspectives were formed, in order to understand their decision-making and assessment strategy. The literature examined in this review followed a path to explore the purpose of assessment, understand the implications of teachers’ perceptions about assessments, take note of the influences of a school and classroom’s assessment culture, emphasize the cultural and equity implications, understand and unify practice
and theories of assessment, recognize the important relationship of teacher input and scholarly recommendations, and acknowledge the counterarguments and cautions to formative assessment.

Using formative assessment should not be thought of as a separate educational tool, but a process that can transform learning, instruction, and the relationships within classrooms (Buck & Trauth-Nare, 2009). Exploring and understanding the how’s and why’s of teachers’ decision-making should expand beyond the external pressures of standardized testing and revolving reforms and delve more deeply into the internal beliefs and rationale of their assessment practices (Duncan & Noonan, 2007; Frey & Schmitt, 2010). There is a need to understand the complex decision-making process teachers make every day. Many teachers choose to follow the curriculum without altering or adapting the set path. Others will venture off, making adjustments to their plans as needed, to accommodate to the students’ many changing needs. How these decisions and adjustments are utilized and integrated into instruction remains a personal and individual choice.

The important issues addressed through the research literature are closely related to these assessment practices and outcomes. When students are exposed to quality instruction, authentic assessments, and appropriate challenges they will prosper. However, when instruction is inconsistent, assessment is disconnected to instruction, and the academic levels are too static or mismatched then, students will struggle and disengage. How can teachers know each student’s interest and level of understanding in a timely fashion? More importantly, what are teachers’ perspectives of these issues and concerns? Possibly, this study can create awareness of quality and authentic assessments that can relate to quality and authentic instruction. More research is needed to understand how teachers form their perceptions and views of assessments, in order to utilize assessments within their proper uses and to create a positive assessment culture. Their
views are highly relevant to the conversation (Sach, 2012) and will become an integral component of this study.

Chapter III Methodology

Introduction

A qualitative research study is one approach widely utilized within educational studies and provided the guidelines, principles, and philosophy appropriate for this study’s inquiry. Creswell (2012) described qualitative studies as a process to explore and share the experiences of a group or individuals and also, as a way to seek deeper understandings of their perceptions of a phenomenon or an event. Merriam (2014) explained further that researchers seek to understand how individuals “construct their worlds,” “interpret their experiences,” and explore the “meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5).

Revisiting the Research Question

This study’s intent was to bring teachers’ voices into this conversation. Exploring a group of teachers’ views was meant to open further discussions because at this time, there was still a lack of clarity on how and why teachers are utilizing particular forms of assessments.

The research question guiding this study focused on:

*How do teachers describe their assessment practice?*

Research Method

Qualitative research is meant to explore the depth, nuance, and multi-dimensions of a context and then, connect the context with an explanation through cross-contextual generalizations (Mason, 2002). The significance of the context in which the events take place becomes an important element to the analysis process and is relevant to the research questions of
this study. The data collected can be both sensitive and flexible to the social context of the participants and then, analyzed with these nuances included within the argument building process (Mason, 2002). A rich philosophical grounding frames the interpretation, which then, evolves into an understanding of the events and experiences of the participants. The understanding can lead to the construction of new knowledge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This process of interpretation often starts with the first collection of data.

The research should remain flexible and allow the focus to emerge and evolve. It becomes an intellectual puzzle to be explored and under consideration are the research questions, data sources, justifications, practicalities, and possible ethical issues (Mason, 2002). Through the research process, interviews are utilized and guided by analytical principles, in which data is generated and inductively conceptualized (Mason, 2002). Thinking inductively, the researcher sifts through data to build themes, larger themes, and a theory of understanding behind the meaning of the events under study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**Research Paradigm.**

The purpose of this doctoral thesis resides within the constructivist research paradigm. As constructivists seek to understand how other’s construct meaning to their worldview, this study’s inquiry endeavored to explore the experiences and contextual background of upper elementary teachers’ preferences and utilization of formative assessments. In constructivism, ideas within one’s mental structures are actively constructed, not passively constructed, and are part of a continuous and cumulative progression (Riegler, 2012). Each individual’s experience gains meaning and an interpretation particular to the individual (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These constructions are variable and personal, and so, constructivist inquirers must be aware of how actual reality can differ for different participants and have multiple perceptions of reality (Guba
& Lincoln, 1994). Sometimes these realities can be conflicting and disparate. Unveiling the “real story” behind the events in teachers’ experiences, and the context of these events, was the basis of this study. Through a dialectic interaction of the researcher and the participant, the inquiry sought to reconstruct and understand the perceptual constructions of these experiences and events and then, develop new and informed generalizations of their meanings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It is imperative that the researcher understand that this judgment must be conducted with discretion and care. The positionality of the researcher should be open and transparent, in order to recognize and contain any appearance of bias.

Through the constructivist’s lens the researcher’s role becomes one of advocacy and activism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). First an inquiry seeks to illicit a full picture of the participants’ experiences and then, through a hermeneutical process, the researcher seeks to evolve a construction that is within consensus of the participant. During the interpretive process, the data from the study should be carefully organized and analyzed in a rigorous manner. Each piece of data becomes the illuminating puzzle piece to the research question. The new construction of theory and concepts often becomes more sophisticated and informed than its “predecessor construction” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111). Then, this new knowledge may become an impetus for constructive action and lasting change.

Educational and social activists need valid and reliable studies in which to frame their arguments. It would not make sense for this study to simply criticize current events in classrooms and schools and the use of standardized testing. Instead, the data should speak for itself and become the evidence necessary for advocacy and social discourse. Creative and workable solutions need to be formed and teachers’ efforts to do so, illuminated and supported. A
qualitative study, working within the constructivism paradigm, could provide the additional data and philosophy to support this advocacy and activism.

**Research Design**

Exploring teachers’ experiences using formative assessments in the upper elementary grades, lends itself well to a qualitative interview study. The Qualitative Interview Study, as outlined by Robert Weiss (1994), relies on a flexible, in-depth interview, which provides an opportunity to obtain a coherent and dense amount of information. The interview process strives to uncover the complexity and nuances of social explanations, which are reconstructed by those involved in a common event (Mason, 2002). These interviews gain greater significance, especially, when these experiences have not been recorded before and are potentially, more revealing through a conversation versus a questionnaire (Mason, 2002).

This exploratory study sought to answer some of the questions missing in research literature and understand how and why this problem of practice has manifested. The interview protocol conducted data that was exploratory in nature and revealed the current perspectives of one sample of teachers’ assessment practices. Keeping accurate records of all conversations, interviews, field notes, and research memos provided the data for analysis. Through the qualitative research coding process, themes and concepts emerged that brought new insights into the teachers’ perceptions of their use of formative assessments. Analytic memos written throughout the research process became an additional resource and insight to the research plan and execution. It was hoped that these findings will contribute to the body of knowledge concerning student learning and its relationship to assessments.
Research Tradition

The interview process of this study was framed by the research tradition of a Qualitative Interview Study, as best described by Robert Weiss in 1994, through his text *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. The interview process was a way to access and learn about people and places we have not directly observed ourselves (Weiss, 1994). Additionally, interviews reveal the internal interpretations and perceptions of events that may not always be apparent or obvious (Weiss, 1994). Summarizing, integrating, and interpreting this information produces a fuller understanding of the respondents’ experiences (Weiss, 1994). Of note, a Qualitative Interview Study could achieve the following aims:

1. Develop detailed descriptions.
2. Provide an integration of multiple perspectives.
3. Describe the process, outcome, and consequences of an event.
4. Explore how a system may or may not work well.
5. Examine how insiders experienced, reacted, and interpreted events.

(Weiss, 1994)

Since a Qualitative Interview Study is meant to reveal new information about a complex problem of practice, there also needs to be an understanding of the actors in the scenarios. Of importance to consider, is if the actors are participants within the events or those affected by the events (Weiss, 1994). Additionally, the perspective of the actors can be oriented as someone who is a representative of an event or an informant of an event. A representative is someone who has experienced something similar and an informant is someone who has directly experienced the identified problem of practice (Weiss, 1994).
This process can be enhanced through an active interview whereby the interviewee’s interpretive responses become open to reveal something not commonly recognized (Holstein, 1995). Each interview should be non-judgmental and confidential. At the same time, the interview should be an interaction that generates “relevant data, which means simultaneously orchestrating the intellectual and social dynamics” of the meeting (Mason, 2002, p. 67). All the while, the researcher needs to keep the flow of questions relevant to the participants’ frame of reference, keep the dialogue within the parameters of the research questions, and provide a comfort level to induce a flow of descriptive responses. The participants also need to be confident in the flow of the interview and grasp the relevance of their input and participation. The process of an interview should help cultivate and activate the participant’s interpretive capabilities of the events and experiences through relevant topic questions, probing questions, and follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The orientation of the questions should reflect the orientation and perspective of the participants.

**Participants**

The participants in this study were upper elementary teachers working in districts outside of an eastern Massachusetts’ metropolitan area. Because of the autonomous nature of elementary classrooms, these grades are ideal environments for teachers to explore and implement various assessment models, methods, and strategies. These participants provided an opportunity to inform the study of their use of formative assessments and the context of these uses. Their orientation and direct experienced opened a window into their assessment decisions, practices, and viewpoints.

Five elementary school teachers were recruited for the study through the professional contacts of the researcher. This provided the opportunity to collect a rich array of data, but also,
to allow for situations, in which a participant may wish to withdraw from the study or appeared to provide incompatible data for the study. The study also needed to account for the possibility of a saturation of similar data, that is, if there was an overlap of ideas and themes and there became a redundancy of information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As to external validity, it was hoped to acquire enough participants to ensure that the “sampling is theoretically diverse enough to encourage broader applicability” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

**Recruitment and Access**

The participants’ names came from the professional contacts of the researcher. Each potential participant was sent an introductory email. Upon each participant’s email reply wishing to discuss the invitation, another email and the consent form was sent to the participant. Both the introductory email and the consent form clearly stated the purpose of the study and the role of the participants’ contribution through the interview. The interviews were arranged at a time and location most convenient for the participants. The written consent forms were signed prior to the interviews. The participants were made aware that their responses would be recorded, analyzed, interpreted, and used in a published document. In all manners, the participants were given sufficient information so they would know their information shared in the interview would not harm them emotionally, physically, or professionally.

**Data Collection**

Meaningful data collection was needed, in order to conduct meaningful analysis. The interviews were conducted either through direct meeting or video conference and the participants were encouraged to bring assessment samples to the meeting. Utilizing an exploratory process, the aim of the interview was to provide a forum for teachers to share their views and experiences.
It was supposed that having participants collect samples to illustrate their use of assessments, would help elicit probing questions and further follow-up questions.

**The Interview Process.**

An interview protocol should be flexible, semi-structured, and ultimately, leave room for further discussions and emerging ideas. Mason (2002) considers the interview as an “interactional exchange of dialogue,” which recognizes how the experiences conveyed are situated and contextual (p. 62). Weiss (1994) suggests using a fixed-question and open response approach that gives the interviewer the flexibility needed to allow for emergent data. The questions should address the research problem, be grounded in supporting literature, and provide substance and depth for data analysis (Weiss, 1994). Planning an interview session to be about one hour long, should provide enough time for a deep conversation but not be so lengthy to be intrusive on the participants’ time. Weiss (1994) notes that the length of the interview should be judged by the participants’ engagement and enthusiasm to continue talking.

Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggested a responsive interview method, which follows a flexible line of questioning that adjusts and responds to the participants. Their sequence suggests using introductory questions, easy questions, tough questions, and then, a closing discussion (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The researcher should build trust during the interview, show respect towards the participants’ responses, refrain from pressuring the participants, and manage all personal emotions so that, not to influence the flow of the discussion (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Mason (2002) also reminds interviewers to know when to talk and when to listen, observe the interviewees’ reactions, and truly listen to the interviewees’ responses. Additionally, Mason (2002) reminds the researcher to be aware of one’s reflexivity, which is thinking critically about
your purpose of the study and how this affects your actions, thoughts, and decisions in your research.

The semi-structured interview can include a list of pre-determined questions that follows the aim of the study, however, these questions should be used as a guide with flexibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The participant’s responses should guide the flow of the discussion and then, the researcher can circle back to questions to begin new lines of thought. The researcher should be aware that participants often prefer to respond in more generalized accounts and this account may actually lead the participants to add their own theories to the meaning behind the events (Weiss, 1994). In order to elicit longer responses, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest avoiding yes/no questions and leading questions. Weiss (1994) had similar suggestions for forming questions that will extend their information, give richer details, identify the actors involved in the events, look for insider events, and make implied indications more explicit.

Not all interviews will flow smoothly. At times, participants may feel unclear about a question or hesitate when forming their thoughts. Sometimes an interviewer needs to help the interviewee develop their responses more fully using follow-up questions (Weiss, 1994). Ultimately, the researcher should be aware of events that have become markers or reference points within the events (Weiss, 1994). These key events can lead to topics not planned on and of surprising interest for the study. The researcher also has to monitor the interview to ensure that the information shared is within the research topic and provides enough data to complete the question. Additionally, the researcher must keep transitions smooth and the researcher/participant partnership moving forward (Weiss, 1994).

For this study, the interview protocol (Appendix A) was designed to establish the background of the participants and then whenever possible, open-ended questions were the
underlying base of the interview. It was planned that through the interview process, the participants’ authentic voice could emerge and uncover their understanding of assessment practice. The interview was recorded, with the participants’ permission, and notes were taken to provide additional rich descriptions.

**Data Management and Storage**

Managing the data collected is a key component of the organizational process within a research study. It is imperative to label data sets into an organizational scheme that can be accessed when needed for reference (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Using themes and labels to identify and sort the data provides a method to access this information, as needed. These themes and labels become a useful starting point to the analysis process and can be adjusted along the course of the study. There is a need for various types of data displays and these will also need to be filed in a careful manner.

For this study, each part of the planning stages, including introductory and confirmation emails, and the interview stages, including all letters to participants, interview protocols, recordings, transcripts, and coding, were filed electronically, along with back-up files and hard-copies. Research memos, drafts and final copies of coding documentation, charts, write-ups, and subsequent written text were also stored electronically and through hard-copies (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In compliance with strict research protocols, all confidential material was stored securely and all identities were protected. This study was conducted by a single interviewer, and so, all confidential material was solely for the research, the individual participant, and/or the thesis advisors, as needed.
Data Analysis

The emergent design aspect of qualitative research supports the collection of data and data analysis simultaneously from the beginning of the first interview and examination of the first document (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data is analyzed both inductively and comparatively (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As data is collected questions, concepts, and themes can be formulated and explored. Each encounter with data is an opportunity to rethink, refocus, and reconfirm alignment within all parts of the study. Analysis of the data with each interview can add depth and direction to subsequent interviews and should not wait until after all the interviews have been completed (Weiss, 1994). This process starts with coding and condensing data, the display of data, and then, verifying conclusions about the data (Miles, Huberman, Saldana, 2014).

Condensing Data.

First researchers look for tentative construction of categories, and then, compare the data through coding (Miles et al., 2014). Coding is the analyzing, categorizing, and condensing of data into heuristic units. This interpretive process should occur with the first interview. Through inductive coding, the first cycle of coding takes note of code themes that emerge progressively, which are grounded empirically and also, considers various data coding, such as, descriptive codes, words or short phrases to describe the topic and In Vivo codes, words or phrases from the interviewees own words (Miles et al., 2014).

Using descriptive coding matched the basis of this study. However, including In Vivo codes added a richness to the analysis (Miles et al., 2014). A beginning proposition of the study wondered how teachers’ experiences shaped their usage of formative assessments in their classrooms. What were these experiences and would there be common terms and phrases used to
describe these experiences? Would similar contexts be described within the background of the participants’ experiences?

The transcripts were coded and then, checked for common and/or disparate themes. Data reduction is another term meant to describe the method and process to select, focus, simplify, and transform data from field work into an abstract analysis and synthesize the conceptual framework and research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). There was a search for relationships between codes as the process moved to the second cycle of coding. This process was achieved through a process of research memos and data analysis through charts and matrices.

**Display of Data.**

In the second cycle of coding, it became important to keep control of the data, as patterns of themes began to form. Text from the transcripts were charted by codes and compared with other transcripts to identify common themes and categories. The themes and categories began to show relationships between categories, explanations, and even, participants (Miles et al., 2014). These categories became relevant to answer the research question, be conceptually congruent, and have separate units of data in each category (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These patterns showed themselves to be flexible during the interview process as new themes emerged, which illuminated the data in novel ways.

The interview questions for this study had some structure and order for discussion. However, the researcher attempted to keep the process flexible and a flow of conversation with the interviewee. There was some danger of getting off topic but there were also opportunities to explore unforeseen and emergent paths. It may be that earlier interviews were slightly different from later interviews. To allow for this, the researcher had key questions for each interview for
the chance of similarities. The codes were adjusted as new data was collected and new themes emerged. Matrices (Appendix B) were formed to compare data and to refer back to earlier coding. Also, research memos were formed and all early coding documentation was referenced to help clarify the analysis process.

**Trustworthiness**

Concerns with trustworthiness are challenges to a study that should be addressed before any possibilities arise. A study with a transparent and ethical framework clearly articulates research questions and intent. This process can be recorded in a research journal that includes regular entries describing reasoning, logistics, and reflections behind the decisions of the researcher, as well as perceptions, values, and assumptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mason, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The process should follow accepted standards to ensure academic integrity. The following standards for research provide support and demonstrate that the concepts identified in the study are credible, dependable, transferable, and confirmable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study followed the standards as outlined above.

**Credibility.**

The credibility of the research is defined as confidence in the findings. One method to build credibility is member checking of the data collected. In this instance, the researcher provides the participants with access to the preliminary results and has an opportunity to assess the adequacy of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This places on record the opportunity for participants to identify errors, as well as confirm the data. This method can also have drawbacks, especially when the participants have particular interpretations that differ from the researchers. The researcher must be aware that the method can also cause confusion, rather than confirmation. Sometimes, the participants may not agree with the wider, abstract synthesis of
multiple participants and perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With these issues in mind, certain considerations were made available to the participants. After the interview, the participants were invited to ask questions about the interview and the study. They also had the opportunity to email or call the researcher with further questions and comments at a later time.

**Dependability.**

The dependability of a study relates to the consistency of the findings and the ability to replicate the findings in another study. A reliable method of checking for dependability is an external audit. Applying an audit by someone outside of the study, creates opportunities to provide valuable feedback and to examine the process of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Within a doctoral dissertation research study, there are many opportunities for external readers to provide feedback. For this study, there was an advisor’s input and second and third readers.

**Transferability.**

The transferability of research relates to the applicability of the findings. The first step for this study was to ensure the “sampling is theoretically diverse enough to encourage broader applicability” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). It was hoped that by interviewing teachers from different contexts, there will be a diversity of perspectives, which may open multiple conversations about the problem of practice and teacher decision-making about their use of assessments.

This diversity may also provide the thick descriptions necessary to instill confidence in the quality and transferability of the findings. It is important to have sufficient detail and rich descriptions of the players, events, and settings, not a superficial account (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This data is needed to conduct extensive analyses and draw informed conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Confirmability.

Confirmability is correlated to the openness of the researcher’s positionality and the degree to which this may have shaped the study. Keeping an audit trail of the research project, from its development to reporting findings, is the most transparent method of confirming the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The audit trail is meant to clarify rationale about sampling, research design, data collection, and data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The important information to be included has been described by Halper (1983, in Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 319) and is charted in Table 1. This study followed the recommendations of an audit trail and retained all pertinent information for confirmability.

Table 1

Elements of an Audit Trail

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Raw data</th>
<th>Including all raw data, written field notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data reduction and analysis products</td>
<td>Summaries, theoretical notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data reduction and synthesis products</td>
<td>Categories (themes/definitions), findings, and conclusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process notes</td>
<td>Methodological notes (showing procedures and rationale) and trustworthiness notes (relating to credibility, dependability, and confirmability)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials relating to intentions and dispositions</td>
<td>Inquiry proposal, personal notes (reflexive and motivations), expectations/intentions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrument development information</td>
<td>Preliminary schedules, interview protocols</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ethical Considerations.

Ethical considerations should be in the forefront throughout the duration of the study. The researcher of a doctoral study has a responsibility to be clear and concise as to the purpose of the
study and the research methods to be used for all those involved, including the participants, those whose supervise the setting of the study, the thesis advisors, and the researcher’s peers. Through careful record keeping, the researcher will have evidence of permission, consent, and clarity for the issues of confidentiality, risk assessment, participant compensation, data access and ownership, and data collection boundaries (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As stated earlier, at all times, the participants need to feel confident their information shared will not harm them emotionally, physically, or professionally.

**Summary**

The formation of a study requires the consideration of many elements, from the planning stage to the published findings. The research design must be in concert with the theoretical framework and research questions. For this qualitative exploratory study, the questions centered around understanding teachers’ experiences and decisions about their use of formative assessments. Through a Qualitative Interview Study, this inquiry endeavored to obtain a rich and dense amount of information (Weiss, 1994) and also, sought to uncover the complexity and nuances in which perceptions are constructed by those interviewed (Mason, 2002). This qualitative interview study relied on a flexible, in-depth interview, which was meant to provide an opportunity to record vivid and detailed accounts of events not quite attainable through surveys and questionnaires (Mason, 2002). This study sought to answer some of the questions missing in the literature and understand the how’s and why’s of a problem of practice.

Through professional contacts, participants were recruited and interviewed. The interview protocol collected data that was exploratory in nature and revealed the current perspectives of one sampling of teachers’ assessment practices. The emerging data collected in
the interviews and the assessment artifacts described by the participants became the basis for the analytical process. Through the qualitative research coding process, themes and concepts revealed new insights into the teachers’ perceptions and context behind their use, or lack of use, of formative assessments. Summarizing, integrating, and interpreting this information produced a wider understanding of the respondents’ experiences (Weiss, 1994).

The purpose and intent of this doctoral thesis connects with the constructivist research paradigm. This study’s inquiry explored the experiences and contextual background of the participants and sought to unveil the “real story” behind the events teachers described in the interviews. A qualitative interview study provided the framework to develop these descriptions, give the insiders’ view, integrate multiple perspectives, and explore the workings of a system (Weiss, 1994). Additionally, the qualitative interview study helped accomplish data collecting goals in an ethical manner, as well as provide new knowledge that may become an impetus for educational advocacy supporting actions that improve teacher instruction, assessment practices, and student learning.

With this criterion in mind, this study sought to provide questions that could illuminate teachers’ experiences, prompt deeper and expanding questions, and understand the responses of the participants. The study asked teachers which formative assessment models they prefer to use and why. Incidentally, it was also hoped the teachers will reveal if they choose not to use formative assessments and why. This additional experiential component brought about an understanding of teacher thinking, their rationale, and the context of their instructional decisions. Was there a component to their decision making and actions that has been overlooked? In general, understanding what information might be missing, more than ever before, is relevant to the conversation about formative assessment and assessments.
Chapter IV: Data Analysis and Findings

This study was designed to conduct qualitative data by interviewing teachers about their experiences with assessments, in order to construct an understanding of how these experiences have affected their assessment practices and decision making. There continues to be limited research on current teachers’ experiences and also, the reasoning behind their assessment decision making. Understanding these reasons becomes important because they do affect the teachers’ assessment choices. Through the interview process, connecting the “real story” behind the events in teachers’ experiences and the context of these events became part of the rich descriptions needed to reconstruct, develop, and form new generalizations of their meaning (Guba & Linclon, 1994).

Research Question

The research question guiding this study was meant to be a starting point for focusing on teachers’ overall experiences, their specific experiences, and their decision-making process. This question also encompassed their classroom practices and their instructional support for school sponsored standardized testing.

The research question guiding this study focused on:

How do teachers describe their assessment practice?

Overview of Data Analysis

The interview protocol was derived from the research question and supported from the literature review. However, the participants relayed information that was unique to their perspective and past experiences. Each interview averaged about one hour and this gave time to record rich and descriptive data. Their responses supported some of the researcher’s early
propositions and included unexpected, personal perspectives. This data drove the formation of coding themes that were descriptive and In Vivo. The inductive process allowed for variations of the researcher’s original propositions to evolve into a more authentic analysis. A coding matrix table was formed to organize the data for analysis and retrieval. For reporting, the themes were arranged in a format similar to Narrative Logic (Chenail, 1995) whereby, they were arranged in a manner to explain the process and rationale behind the teachers’ assessment practices. The study ultimately endeavored to change what might first be considered an interesting story, into something worthy of “truth and utility” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 11). It is only after careful analysis can quality generalizations be constructed and confirmed within existing bodies of knowledge.

Description of the Sample

Five teachers were recruited from the professional contacts of the researcher. These teachers work in districts that are north and south of a metropolitan area in eastern Massachusetts. They were recruited for an interview because of their teaching experience working within the upper elementary grades. With their permission, the interview was recorded. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic, their places of work were not identified and they were given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

The five female participants of the study have teaching experiences ranging from five to twenty years in the classroom. All five of the teachers hold a master’s degree in education. Three of the teachers are general education teachers and two are special education teachers who work closely with general education co-teachers. The two special education teachers spend time in general education classrooms and during these instructional periods, work with all students in
need of assistance. Three of the teachers work in more affluent districts, one teacher works in a middle-class demographic, and one teacher works with a lower income population of students. The researcher first tried to establish the background perspectives of the participants. These perspectives are framed by their personal and classroom experiences. The participants stressed the importance of student involvement in the learning and assessment process.

Abby, a special education co-teacher, has taught for over five years in the second, third, and fifth grades. Her assessment focus this year is to understand her large ADHD population, provide the right types of assignments for her other students, and also, “I think for me, based on the student population that I have, I need to kind of figure out what assessments are best.” She has redesigned some of her school’s required benchmark tests to accommodate her students’ specific needs and regularly advocates for less testing.

Danielle has taught for more than eleven years in the third and fourth grades. She has been both a lead teacher and a mentor for new teachers. In her classroom, she stresses positive interactions between students and wants her students to use assessments as a learning tool. She has felt the need to add the “emphasis of diligence and perseverance” with her students. Danielle wants them to go beyond just being “done with the test and be happy.” Her district has a “significant” lower income population and is the only participant to mention the contextual implications of her school.

Lauren, with twenty years of experience, has taught fifth and sixth grades. She emphasizes the importance of building strong relationships with her students. She feels this has provided avenues for students to become “receptive to” the encouragement and guidance she offers to help students be more successful. She wants her students to learn beyond the curriculum
because it “doesn’t have to be that they’re learning the math skill,” but also stresses students “learning perseverance.”

Melissa, a special education co-teacher, has taught for over six years in the fourth and sixth grades. She emphasizes the formation of assessment that encompasses a “multi-modality” approach. She is sensitive to student reactions to test-taking and whenever possible, considers each way her students may react when planning for assessment. She also provides extensive MCAS test preparation sessions for her students that include test-taking strategies and calming exercises.

Tara has taught for over six years in the fourth and fifth grades and strives to find innovative ways to inspire her students to learn. In particular, she has incorporated the use of masterworks of art to study events in history and for writing prompts considering point of view and symbolism. She wants to bring something different into her instruction and said this activity “makes them think more. I want them to think.”

Thematic Findings

The data was organized into themes that were related to the conceptual framework of assessment decision making. First to be reported was the participants’ perceptions of the role of assessment in their instruction. This role was related to the participants’ perceptions of the use of assessments and its relationship to their classroom culture. Each of the participants’ views became apparent throughout the interview process as their authentic voices began to emerge. To be analyzed further, was the participants’ perception of their school’s assessment culture and its relationship to data collection of students and the acceptance of teachers’ professional input. The next thematic category recalled the participants’ past training and assessment education and the
participants’ personal memories of being assessed as students. These personal threads were related to student perceptions of assessment and students’ socioemotional connection to assessments. Finally, the participants relayed their perceptions of the future of assessment and its connection to assessment practices of today. Figure 4 illustrates this possible path as conceptualized through this one sampling of participants.

Figure 4. The Possible Path to Decision Making and Assessment Practice

The Perceived Role of Assessments

The five participants were asked to describe their perceived role of assessments. Through analysis of the data, it became important to start their decision-making path here. The group gave answers describing two different philosophical points of view. Three of the teachers described assessment as a way of gauging how the students were learning and two of the teachers saw
assessment as a way to assess how effective the teacher was. However, they all saw assessment as a way to drive teacher instruction in meaningful ways. These initial comments illustrate the differences in perspectives that are present in teachers’ philosophical frameworks within one region, but could also be in one district, in one school, and even one grade level. Finding common ground is important for unifying the purpose of assessments and their eventual uses in the classroom.

Each participant described assessment through her own philosophical lens focusing on student achievement or teacher effectiveness. Three participants viewed the process as assessing the students’ progress. Lauren, aware of how she used observation and conversations with students to informally assess learning, said assessment is to “measure what they got out of what we taught. Also, to measure a student’s level of investment, work habits, and their inner desire to do their best.” Being in a similar vein, Abby said, “I think kind of two purposes, to help drive teacher instruction, to see where they need to teach further or re-teach a topic, and I also think it’s used to show student progress.” Tara was more specific by describing two forms of assessment. She said, “If it’s formative assessment, that for me is more as a guide to my own, like where do we need to go next? I think of it as a dipstick, a quick check. Summative is showing me what you learned from the whole unit.” Their views did not diminish the teacher’s role within the assessment process, but showed an emphasis to the student role. The question becomes, what can the student do differently to improve?

From another angle, Danielle said, “I use the assessment to guide my teaching to make sure I’ve covered the topics.” Later she said, “It would give us an outline of what skills we feel at this time, this century, are important.” In the same light, Melissa explained, “The role, the standard typical role for assessments is to gauge, I think, the effectiveness of the instructor and
how well the material is being conveyed to the learner.” In this light the emphasis is placed largely on the teacher’s role in the process. If these distinctions were emphasized or were to cause a conflict between teachers of one grade or teachers and administrators, this could cause a conflict for the overall views and uses of various assessments from each other. One view could seek remediation for students without changing instructional or assessment practices. The other view could bring about unwarranted assumptions of fault under a system of strict teacher accountability. Keeping both ends of the spectrum in mind would help to catalyze a more measured approach.

This distinction was not as separate for this group of participants because they all felt that assessment was meant to “inform their instruction.” Through this combined lens, students are frequently monitored formatively and this data more accurately represents steady student progress and/or student remediation. Within this research sample, all five of the participants appeared to have similar views on how they use assessments, both within the classroom and for school administered standardized tests.

**The Use of Assessments**

The five participants described their uses of assessments through their goals for learning and student behavior. Just by the researcher using the term “assessment,” the teachers’ automatically assumed the discussion was about standardized testing. They acknowledged an extensive use of school administered standardized tests. They saw the value of the data that is generated, as Abby said, “I definitely rely on what the testing is saying.” However, they felt the goals of the tests were imposed on them and did not necessarily match their own personal instructional goals for their students. This mismatch made them question the data on their
students’ progress and their decisions to use similar types of assessment. Thinking of how her students will react to the test-taking environment, Abby explained, “I kind of take it [standardized tests] with a grain of salt and know that there’s some students out there that just aren’t great test takers, and they can show what they know in different ways.” She often seeks out alternative or condensed ways to measure her students’ understanding.

Lauren and Tara described the interaction of the curriculum and assessment in their practice. Tara has spent time working on her district’s curriculum standards. She feels this experience has brought about a deeper understanding of assessments and learning. She uses assessment formatively instead of in a summative manner because as she adamantly stated, “I don’t want to get halfway through a topic and you’re [the student] lost.” Students can be assessed in a variety of ways, which can be designed by individual teachers or by teams of teachers. Lauren’s school uses a grade level team approach to the math curriculum’s planning and assessments. The team meets regularly to discuss lessons and make adjustments whenever needed. Even with this extra effort, some students have difficulties. She makes her own adjustments and explained, “I can’t change the math curriculum, but I can change how it is delivered. It’s not just one grade, it’s a combination of all things.” Both Lauren and Tara felt they learned more about the students through dialogue and a formative “dip stick,” than strictly a traditional testing situation.

The participants’ comments began to show a two-fold view of assessment for their students. There are the school sponsored standardized summative assessments and various classroom assessments, which exclude the primary use of standard summative tests. The students’ achievement on the standardized tests is viewed by the teachers as questionable. Their orientation is towards the students’ overall reaction in the test-taking situation. Danielle and
Melissa, who saw the role of assessment as a measure of the teacher’s progress, as well, reported similar views on the test taking. Melissa explained how her students need more than one data collection tool, because, “I have to take these tests with a grain of salt, because they might be anxious [about the test]. Once a student hears the word test, some of them tend to freeze.”

The teachers’ reservations for the success of the students could also reflect their reservations for the meaning of the scores. Danielle saw her class this year as a challenge and does not give standardized tests as much weight in her assessment of the students’ progress. She explained, “Clarifying their thoughts is very difficult for them…. I almost feel sometimes the students are at a different developmental level to understand those questions.” In this case, Melissa and Danielle did not mention the teacher’s role in the students’ progress. They would need to take note if their administrators did. They would want to know the extent teachers are held accountable for preparing students. This component of the assessment culture will be discussed later.

For classroom assessment, the five participants felt they relied less on summative forms of assessment and more on formative assessment. However, they felt many teachers in their schools do not agree with their perspective. These teachers continue to use years old textbooks and the corresponding unit and chapter review questions as a guide to learning and evaluation for understanding. The discussions that followed in the interviews showed it was not the “paper and pencil” element that was a problem for them, but how the student was asked to show their learning in static ways. All of the teachers conveyed they often used their own paper and pencil tests but attempted to make them authentic to the goals of learning. Lauren said, “For some [students] to write or have me present it on paper is more succinct.”
Instead, the teachers described the multiple ways they can clearly assess a student’s level of understanding of the concepts and skills being taught that day. They seemed to feel this decision-making process within instruction comes about naturally and intuitively. Danielle expressed, “I know what works and what doesn’t!” Lauren said that all these years, knowing what the students were learning was “a gut feeling.” The researcher pressed the participants to explain further how they bring their intuition into examples of assessments. Tara conveyed that her view on assessment goes beyond what a test can show. She explained, “My favorite kind of assessment is one in which the answer is not predetermined or prescribed. It is, you bringing what you can learn to create, something that shows me what you’ve learned.” She then described her use of project-based assessments and the use of rubrics to keep students on track throughout the assessment process. She can formatively track students’ progress before she conducts the summative assessment for the project.

Lauren also utilizes a multi-tiered approach of guiding students formatively through the process of understanding their science lesson. She made changes to her classroom assessment in science. She said, “I have gotten away from some science tests and prefer to do lab reports and writing what was learned. [This is important because] students have trouble explaining themselves.” This is not an ability that comes easily to this age group. They need a chance to develop their writing and analysis skills. As Danielle, has previously mentioned, it is difficult for her students to clarify their thoughts. She tries to find opportunities to talk with each student and ask them to “describe back to me what we just discussed;” “describe the steps to a math problem;” and “make a higher connection” to the topic being discussed. She is concerned with how her fourth graders will perform on the lengthy writing section of the MCAS exam.
Providing more opportunities for writing in of itself should be considered valuable learning time. Instead, it can also become another performance pressure for the students. The participants commented that they regularly stressed writing, including the use of rubrics, but additionally, their assessment of writing becomes more urgent as testing dates come closer. In response, Abby has her students continue the optional benchmark testing writing exercises for their formative value. She described how she teaches a narrative writing unit and then, to evaluate each student, she gives writing prompts and graphic organizers. She said of her students, “Everyone was working individually and it gave us a great chance to see what they could do.” She wants to see if they will use the strategies learned without teacher prompting or support.

The participants also emphasized an assessment practice that brought together a need to gather information on each student, but to do so in a manner different from a static question and answer test. Melissa tries to use assessments that have a “kinesthetic” element to them. She described one of her favorite methods, “We need the hard evidence [of learning], but I think there’s other ways to gather it, the students can go around the room, and they’re doing a scavenger hunt, I can have a data sheet right next to me. If they’re writing down problems, and they’re solving problems, it doesn’t matter how it’s being presented.” She’s giving her students opportunities to practice skills and motivating them to want to solve the problems. She is also collecting the data required by her administrators.

The current emphasis on collecting data and multiple exam sessions has provided much needed information about students but has caused some frustrations for teachers, as well. Danielle expressed how some of the teachers feel differently about assessments. “I do think sometimes my coworkers think, ‘Oh, it’s beginning and end. Done. I’ve taught that. I’m done.’”
Lauren expressed why teachers may choose one type of assessment over another when she said, “I enjoy using different ones than I enjoy correcting to be totally honest.” To be able to correct simple answers and get a clear score is less time consuming and “easily measured,” as opposed to giving “feedback” and “making rubrics.” These assessment decisions add to the structure of the instructional and assessment practice, which has an influence on the classroom culture.

The Classroom Culture

The autonomous space of the classroom remains the teacher’s domain. Here the pedagogical philosophy and practice would be most apparent. The participants were asked about an ideal day in their classroom and what constitutes a moment of learning. The participants introduced the socioemotional element of learning and the importance of relationships between teachers and students, which prompted new threads for analysis. One socioemotional thread was reported within this theme and then, another when reporting teachers’ personal memories of assessment.

The participants felt that noting the reactions of students in the learning process, came from “building a trusting relationship” that is “warm and respectful” (Abby) and “making bonds and having special memories” (Lauren). Additionally, “making them feel comfortable” (Melissa) was related to the students’ reactions to the assessment process. As Melissa explained further, “It’s also how you present the assessment. What the setting looks like and the environment and also, appealing to the emotional state of the learner at the moment, too.” For Tara, it was important to provide opportunities where students could be successful and “be far more excited, and have a sense of pride and accomplishment.” Danielle wanted the classroom to have “lots of energy” in the room and “smiles on their faces” that “takes away the anxiety” that can occur.
This understanding of the dynamic nature of the classroom can become the important elements of an assessment practice. These elements can become considerations for the daily routines and decisions made each day, for each subject taught.

Within these types of classroom cultures, there was also agreement among the participants as to the instructional use of small groups and its value for working with students more closely. This orientation towards learning provides time to assess students individually and provide more targeted instruction. Their discussions about small groups was not anticipated by the researcher and created another thread for analysis. Melissa works primarily in small groups and feels this allows her more opportunities to provide a variety of activities, which can include more formative data collections. Abby described how, “In the small group setting I do a lot of skill work …right now, for example we’re working on inferring… using reading materials of interest to them …it’s more relevant to them and the participation is a lot higher.”

The five participants expressed the positive attributes of small group instruction and conducting formative assessment simultaneously versus trying to accomplish something similar with the whole class. They did not report all the variations they may have for group work or their frequency of use. Lauren reported that she gave more time to some groups and less time to groups that could accomplish their work independently. Both Tara and Lauren stressed the use of flexible groupings, which gave the teachers more opportunities to assess the skills of students within differentiated groups. Lauren explained how she just started a new system for grouping students in math. “I kind of loosely grouped the kids at their table by ability. It was … a split decision on my part because I wanted to work with each group” in a different way. Tara would agree as she has seen the positive results from flexible ability grouping in her classroom. Because the groupings are not static but skill based, they change members frequently and are
specific to each particular grouping. These groups give her an opportunity to “pull a strategy group to just go over that skill” that was needed and to assess them formatively, as well. Danielle found an additional positive result from small group work. She saw the value of “working with their peers to reinforce what’s going on or if they have a question,” as part of the practice and encouragement that “hopefully worked through all the misunderstandings that they might have started with.” Small group work is not new to education, which can be underutilized in some classrooms. It is a tool that can enhance the learning of the students and provide multiple opportunities to keep the learning process moving forward and to assess formatively. However, less time may be allotted to these kinds of activities when a school’s assessment culture wants classrooms to be in test prep modes.

**The School Assessment Culture**

Most schools in Massachusetts administer the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, MCAS, to their students on a yearly basis from grades 3-10. The purpose is for showing academic progress in schools and for reporting test results in years 4th, 8th, and 10th grades. Other cities and towns made a choice to administer the alternative test called Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, PARCC. Even though Massachusetts has the most success in the country with standardized testing, there continues to be an emphasis on improving student scores. A new version of the MCAS will be administered in the spring of 2017 and will be taken solely on computers. This pressure to perform has been a contentious topic in school districts across the state. Some schools, wary of student performance, may take time away from some subjects to practice tests for the tested subjects. The participants also felt the pressure from their administrators.
This particular sample group of teachers seemed to have adjusted to the balance required between the school sponsored standardized testing and their own classroom assessment practice. Regardless, they also are not in agreement with the amount of testing mandated by their administrators. Tara explained how last year, “It was seven days of state testing. And then we had, because we adopted a new math program, we had end of topic assessments. We had a benchmark, … a benchmark, … a benchmark …, I mean it was, it felt like we were constantly testing the kids. And that was just summative, not even formative.” Tara also described the shifting focus as scores highlight weaknesses, as well as strengths. She explained, “[Writing] was a focus a few years ago. The focus shifted to math this year, I think as a district we’re focused on reading.” Ironically, her district has scored well and made satisfactory improvements.

In Danielle’s district, whose low-income students have not made the necessary improvements, there also is an irony to the administrations’ actions and reactions. “Assessments are deemed to be vital, yet it doesn’t actually guide the administration. The superintendent and the school committee don’t put the funding where it is needed ... They’re [the students] going to have to write open response questions on the computer. They haven’t really typed that much, so we’re in a panic. We have like 30 [Chromebooks] for 150 students.” How can they prepare for the impending tests as Lauren’s district does, as she readily admits, “… there is a certain degree of teaching to the test that we do, we have to, we just have to. Like I said, [we] got to prepare them.”

These perspectives are indicative of the concern many teachers have had over several years. The assessment culture remains the same and will continue to do so when tests results are tied to school funding. In most schools, they cannot afford to resist the system, possibly for financial reasons and possibly, for status and reputation. Melissa knows her affluent district
wants to keep their reputation for excellent schools and said, “I think we put a lot of emphasis on MCAS scores. We need to step away from that.” Abby echoes this sentiment because her affluent district is in competition, unofficially of course, with other districts. She reported that though their scores are very good, “Our district does rely heavily on the data to determine whether students have made progress and whether teachers are making progress… the superintendent … his goal is that students will make 5% growth in math” this year, on the benchmark tests… Teachers don’t think we can measure everything in one test. I agree.”

However, some schools have begun to try to work within the system in a different manner. In Tara’s school the teachers spoke up about the amount of testing and they did not know how the administration would respond. Tara and her colleagues had commented, “The data is only good depending on what you do with it. You can have an overload of data and if you’re not using it to inform your instruction, if it’s formative, it’s useless. There’s no point. And if you’re not going to use it then we [the teachers of her district] said, why are we giving so much?” The reaction the administration took was a compromise with the teachers and initiated through teacher input. This gave some of the instructional goal making back to the teachers. Tara and her colleagues had some satisfaction that their input was listened to. Unfortunately, the district’s main focus and primary goals still centered on the MCAS exams. Each of the five participants relayed similar frustrations, after all of participants’ dedicated work in the classroom and recognition by their administrators, ultimately as Abby conveyed, “They do not use classroom assessments to determine [our students’] progress.”
The Role of Teacher Input

The participants reported similar district emphases on standardized testing, however, the districts had different reactions to the role of teacher input, in regards to the types of standardized tests used and the frequency of use. All of the participants had concerns about students being over-assessed and felt this conflicted with their preferred assessment practice. Some of the participants felt their input was valued and others felt their administrators disregarded teacher input. Individually, Melissa felt she has input into the performance profiles she compiles about her students. This flexibility gives credence to her professional evaluation of what is best for her students. She wants the profiles “to explain the child as a whole, not just what they look like on paper is really helpful. I look for those opportunities to measure them, not just quantitatively but qualitatively as well.” Lauren’s school has a strong grade level team approach. They meet and discuss the successes and negatives of certain issues and collaborate on curriculum plans. When something needs discussing, “we work together to analyze” and make recommendations for changes. She feels the team approach works well for her school. Their grade level meetings often include the curriculum coordinator. They work collaboratively to adjust the curriculum and assessments upon the recommendations of the team. Lauren and Melissa feel their expertise is valued in these instances and this has brought about some synergistic energies of instructional and assessment goals between the department heads and teachers (i.e. the curriculum coordinator and Lauren; the special education coordinator and Melissa).

Danielle’s situation is different. Past administrators have been more receptive to teacher input than the present administration. Danielle would like to see teachers have time to “sit down and actually go over their [standardized test] results with each other, I think that would create a continuum as a grade.” She would like the different grade levels to communicate what they’ve
noticed about their students and have information passed on. “We see the common themes” that reoccur every year. Danielle has been a teacher leader in the school. Her recommendations for this type of collaboration was not adopted by the school. She added, “The grade level has a tendency to be focusing on so many various things that the assessment gets, again, slid to the side. We’re just expected to do it on our own.” Her frustration has tainted her vision of possible instructional long term goals and she has already mentioned attitude changes in teachers. Worse of all, in Danielle’s opinion, the school leadership is too overwhelmed to make changes.

Abby has experienced more positive reactions to her input. She is required to test her students regularly with Star Reading and Star Math. However, when she saw a need for her students different from what a standard test might require, she incorporated other assessments, including her own. She explained, “I’m finding more success when I give shorter [fewer questions at a time] assessments … They’re [the students] more cooperative, and I’m seeing their scores are higher on the little check-ins.” She has been able to share her findings in data meetings and has administrative support. The administration gave her the flexibility to adjust the school’s interim and benchmark requirements, in order to accommodate for her particular students’ needs. These changes have bolstered Abby’s assessment practice and increased her students’ productivity. The students feel less stressed, as well.

The five participants have experienced different opportunities to provide their input into school policies and routines. Each felt more input could be adopted by their administrators, but also understood that all ideas will not necessarily instill great changes. The participants admitted some teachers are not utilizing assessments, in their opinion, in positive manners. The participants reported that the overall effect of a school’s assessment culture was not a guarantee of acceptance or compliance to its policies, both positively and negatively, by the teachers of
their schools. The participants also have an understanding and support for some aspects of the assessment culture and data collection through the mandated tests. The participants showed a certain comfort level with data collection and explained their view of its value for understanding student progress. This comfort level harkens back to a dual assessment practice, decision making, and routines. On one hand the participants prefer being in control of their assessment practice and on the other hand, as Lauren explained, “I get the overall philosophy that they’re [standardized tests] necessary.” Particularly, the participants saw the value and role of data collection.

The Role of Data Collection

Each participants’ district encouraged the use of data collection and analysis. They have regular data meetings to discuss the results of the latest round of standardized tests. Each district also had a different response for creating strategies to improve the data, possibly due to the school’s success. In districts where the scores are well placed, there was encouragement and strategy sessions. In the district with lesser progress, Danielle reported, “Since we’ve moved into using so much assessment, many teachers have become disengaged with the whole idea.” Ultimately, all five of the participants felt the use of data was positive for informing instruction but had a different view of how one can collect data.

To the participants, the process of using data was productive but the process of collecting data was seen as time consuming and at times, overwhelming. Lauren saw the endless correcting and data input as, “it’s not all going to be data … You would never teach or speak to the kids, you’d just be collecting data.” Lauren finds that the constant checking off of standards and correcting papers takes up valuable instructional time. This process of ensuring students are not
over assessed is only partially working as the lower-achieving students are constantly asked to show progress through interim and benchmark tests. Tara gets a list of students who are watched more closely and now, when others are “demonstrating proficiency there’s no need to add in all these extra assessments. It’s just wasting instruction time, and we don’t get a ton of that.”

Gathering information about student progress in an ongoing process. For the participants of this study, this includes many of their own classroom assessments, as well as the mandated school sponsored standardized yearly, interim, and benchmark tests. The prioritizing of these tests is set by the assessment culture and policies of the school. In some schools, there is flexibility in the process and others it is mandated.

When there is communication about the uses of the data, then teachers can use the information productively. Lauren appreciates how data “helps [convey a student’s progress] because it’s not arbitrary, you know what the standard is and what you are supposed to be teaching and what they’re supposed to be getting.” Danielle enjoys the process of analyzing students’ classroom tests and sharing the information with the students. Danielle uses data analysis regularly and said, “Data collection is, for me, vital … It really does drive my instruction … If I’m going to take the time to instruct students and then give them a test, I like to sit down and I look at it … How many passed, how many didn’t? What question really got everybody?” This is also time consuming and Danielle is disappointed in how many teachers at her school discount this process. To them it is a finite process, the scores are made and it’s time to move onto the next topic or unit.

Helping teachers devise a plan to use the data could create a positive and cooperative assessment culture. Melissa also views assessment as an opportunity to, “break the data down, and really look at what it means. For example, how that translates into the classroom? What
accommodations do students need to facilitate their learning and make it more accessible to them?” Melissa feels she is always looking for multiple ways to collect data and uses multiple forms of data. She wants information on the “whole child,” not just quantitative information. Abby’s district meets once a term to discuss the data they have from multiple standardized tests. “There are a lot of ideas thrown around at these data meetings about how we can help students.” The ideas are usually helpful but some of the ideas are too time consuming. She prefers to collect data from a variety of sources. Some research has shown that navigating this process is enhanced through teacher education. Opportunities to share perceptions of the curriculum, instruction, and assessment can help fill in the inevitable gaps in assessment and pedagogical knowledge as teachers will always need to adjust their practice to fit the needs of their ever changing and unique students. Studying new research and sharing experiences, including personal memories of being assessed themselves, as young students, opens new avenues for reaching every student.

**The Connection of Teacher Education**

The participants were asked about their prior education in assessments throughout their teaching career. Four of the five participants reported similar undergraduate and graduate teacher education lacking in assessment experiences. Only one had an undergraduate course in assessment that was of significance. They all regarded their in-service education as more relevant to their understanding of student learning and assessment. Melissa had some assessment training in graduate school but not enough for her first position. She felt “that was mostly learned on the job through other special educators, through mentoring programs and also through doing.” “I think it would be great if a person led a small group PD [professional development] on how to use a tool [new assessment].” Abby also saw the impact professional development could have
made on her first years of teaching. She recalled, “I know I was just kind of thrown in and the teachers I was working with just kind of showed me how to use all these assessment tools.” Conversely, when teachers do not get support from colleagues they can be seen as incompetent and possibly, academically harmful for their students. Mistakes can be made that form lasting negative impressions on the students.

Lauren’s strong grade level team has been her most helpful source of understanding her use of the standards, frameworks, and assessments. She said, “Definitely, my colleagues are really helpful, being able to have those conversations with them.” Tara’s experience is similar and has had the benefits of grade level collaborations. Her school’s schedule was rearranged this year so that teachers had time to “be able to collaborate and share resources, or strategies, or whatever is huge!” Also, for teacher education she preferred professional development to study specific topics used in the classroom. Danielle also agreed that speaking with colleagues has been helpful to discuss assessments. She has had some professional development on “how to look at data.” However, she feels she has learned the most independently and recalled, “It’s really been more independent, on my own, either reading or researching or discussing with colleagues. It’s really not what has been provided to me.” When the system is not coordinated, then disjointed decisions can become counter-productive. There may be overlaps and/or gaps in instructional goals. In a more productive manner, making instructional and assessment decisions within a cohesive and synchronized system provides continuity for the curriculum, instructional, and assessment goals.

The five participants reported how the collaborative approach to learning seemed to be the most helpful to their understanding of their students and the various assessments they needed to use. How the participants utilized this information was also related to their views of how best
to relate to their students. The participants also used their own school experiences as students to understand their students’ assessment anxieties.

**Teachers’ Personal Memories of Assessment**

The personal experiences of being assessed remained vivid in the teachers’ memories. Some of the participants described how these memories continue to have an influence on their present ways of responding to their own students’ assessment issues. Only Lauren reported she had few worries about testing, recalling, “I don’t remember a lot about them. I don’t remember them being very exciting, certainly not, but I never minded them. I didn’t find them overly difficult.” She understands her students’ anxiety over testing, but did not feel the same as a student. She is less inclined to change the standardized testing system in her school. Danielle reported how a positive test result changed her perspective of her own abilities. She recounted, “Actually, it’s kind of funny. I was in the fourth grade and I took the Iowa test, and my teacher … announced to the class that we had a math whiz…it was just a surprise to me when she said my name …It kind of helped the start of my better school years … She had us chart things. How are you doing this week?” She carries some of her teacher’s organizational methods for herself and her students into her classroom today. She also stresses how the students can improve their academic progress through hard work and perseverance.

The other participants felt their own experiences helped them understand why their students have major anxiety and academic struggles. As Abby explained, “I think just because of my own personal, my own struggles with standardized testing, it’s kinda made me rely on it a little bit less while teaching. If a student’s scoring a little bit lower, I kind of will try to rely more on my observations and my informal assessment.” Melissa described how her struggles turned
into a positive experience because in elementary school, there were a few times, “that I clearly didn’t know what to do, but was afraid to ask for help in the moment.” In middle school, “I remember studying and staying after school and still not getting a really good grade. I had multiple teachers from sixth to eighth that were so willing to stay after school.” This “meant something to me, as I clearly remember.” Her grades improved because of the teachers’ extra time with her. Sharing these stories with their students were also meant to connect with and smooth away the students’ anxieties.

Tara became more philosophical about her experiences. “All I did was memorize names, dates, and events… Didn’t care for it. I never felt successful in math, compared to my peers … And I think as I got older, because I struggled, I started to appreciate that everybody learns in a different way. Everybody can demonstrate their learning in a different way.” She felt this understanding became an important cornerstone to her pedagogical development. She heartily stressed how her assessment practice strives to provide many avenues for learning in different ways and having choices for students to demonstrate their new knowledge.

The teachers said they frequently shared their personal stories with their students. Each participant added a component of their own teachers’ reactions to their successes or difficulties and this also, continued to influence them today. They reported it has a part in their relationship building process and also, it has become one of their models for motivating students. The participants reported how they made the socioemotional connection with their students to the students’ learning and responses to assessment.

**Students’ Socioemotional Connection**

The participants’ concerns for their students’ well-being was a higher priority than all of the discussions about assessments. Recognizing and maintaining the students’ socioemotional
development was an important thread introduced by the five participants. When asked about their ideal day in the classroom, the descriptions were solely about their students. Understanding their students’ anxiety was important to the participants. Some participants reported students crying about the idea of taking a test and other students crying when they got their test results. These situations were distressing for both the teacher and the students. The participants reported that these experiences influenced how they approached testing situations with students and also, their perception and recommendations for the future use of assessments.

**The Perceived Future of Assessments**

The participants were asked about their thoughts on the future of assessments. Four participants reported a desire to change the present assessment practices of their school, whereby in the future, assessments could be administered multiple times and in different formats. The idea of formally basing a student’s progress on one test seemed unrealistic to the participants, as reported in the comments below.

Abby’s work as a special education teacher requires her to follow a designated plan and show evidence of student’s accommodations and progress. However, she sees the ones most at risk of being over assessed are those needing constant monitoring. She has sought to redesign the types of assessments and the length of the testing sessions, in order to provide the best possible learning environment for her students. She explained,

“I think assessment is very valuable, and I think for the future, I’m hoping, and actually think there are more teachers that are going towards allowing students choices and showing what they know in different ways, other than just a test. I think hopefully we’re
kind of moving in the right direction, that we’re not only focused on those paper and pencil assessments.”

Melissa, also sees her work as a special education teacher as an advocate for providing the best possible learning environment for her students. She happily includes all students in the class, as well. Finding a balance and giving students opportunities to enjoy learning and being successful was an important goal for her.

“I think the future direction of assessments should be mindful. If at all possible, really take into account the student as a learner, and that one assessment doesn’t really fit the bill…have three differentiated assessments or four…is an idyllic response. What information really matters?”

Danielle has the least resources and the least support of the study sample. She is considerate of the students’ situations and works to help them overcome the disadvantages of their backgrounds. She strives to make all students fully capable and responsible for their learning. She would like more instructional time and more authentic assessments, which more accurately reflect the achievement and progress she feels her students can make.

“I would hope that assessments actually become fewer…. The amount of time lost from instruction to give assessments, handed down state wide, district wide, that needs to stop. It just seems like the emphasis on testing needs to decrease, but quality of testing needs to increase. I would like to see the assessments become more district run versus state run.”
Tara strives to find innovative and creative methods to assess her students and also, to inspire their learning. She does not agree with the amount of time the students spend in test sessions but sees the value of the data. She wants non-educators to understand how “different” and “complex” education is today. The students are more involved in their own education through self-reflection and reviewing error corrections. In this type of classroom culture the students’ responsibilities would not end when the test is over, but instead, would be an important part of the assessment process.

“Like instruction, it should be meaningful. I think there are many ways to gauge a students’ growth and learning, and we need to be open to giving them choice in how they do it, whenever possible.”

Lauren is the only participant with a different view. Her strong grade level team meets frequently, has a cooperative approach, and regularly makes adjustments in lesson planning and instructional goals. In her years of experience, she has seen many “changes” come and go. The new MCAS is yet another change that may stay or may go.

“I don’t think we should really change anything right now, I really don’t. We need to kind of figure out what MCAS is going to be now with this new version and then, maybe make the adjustments from there. I don’t like the idea of changing for the sake of changing.”

She ends the interview stressing that it is important to her to share that in her personal philosophy, “It’s not all about the test.” Possibly, she believes the anchors of the instructional process are still the teachers and their work in the classroom. She proves this everyday through her instructional decisions and her striving to have a quality and effective assessment practice.
Summary

Throughout the interviews, the participants expressed that keeping the learner in the forefront was of the upmost importance in any future uses of assessments. They have stressed the various components important to their own assessment practice and gave the multiple examples above. It is proposed that assessment practice is the culmination of each teacher’s decision-making path, which is made every day, several times a day. The data uncovered many similarities between the perspectives of this one sampling and a few differences, as well. A diagram was formed to illustrate the possible path teachers may follow in forming their assessment practices.

The teachers discussed their view of their own classroom culture, their efforts to form positive relationships with students, and their efforts to navigate the perceived negotiables and non-negotiables within the assessment culture of their school. The final theme to be reported was the participants’ views on the future of the assessment of students. Here four of the five participants were in general agreement as to changing the focus and formats of assessment. One participant felt it was important to wait and see if the new standardized tests had improved. Though all of the participants reported they used assessments that were formative, they returned to the topic of summative assessments. Upon further analysis of their input, the researcher will discuss these findings and connect their implications for practice, as well as assessment practices, in the next chapter.
Chapter V: Discussion of Findings

Teachers have a multitude of interactions with students each day, which center on building relationships and conveying instructional information. Assessment is a part of this interactive process. How teachers proceed to each step in this process is dependent on decisions that include the teacher’s orientation pedagogically, the goals for the lesson, the material resources available, and the teacher’s professional knowledge (Schoenfeld, 2011a). The final step in the process may be a summative assessment or the final step could be part of a revolving formative assessment. It has not been well understood how teachers make these decisions and choices, however, it has been known that teachers do not always have the same pedagogical philosophy that matches scholarly research and recommendations. Advances in the understanding and use of formative assessments have been disregarded in many classrooms. There continues to be a significant reluctance by teachers to utilize these assessments, as part of their instructional and assessment practice. Where might their philosophy and assessment practices come from?

This exploratory study sought to answer questions about teachers’ experiences and uses of assessments, in general, and formative assessments, in particular. A qualitative interview study lent itself well for exploring teachers’ experiences using formative assessments in the upper elementary grades. The study began by recruiting five teachers, with approximately five to twenty years of experience. The protocol began the conversation by gathering background information as to the participants’ ideal day instructionally and students’ moments of learning. Then, the interview progressed to various open-ended discussions about their classrooms, assessment, their school’s assessment philosophy, their students’ views of assessment, teacher education, personal memories, and their views of the future of assessment. The data was coded
according to where the teachers’ emphasis lay. Because the teachers’ responses had more similarities than differences, thematic patterns quickly emerged.

This study also sought to understand how and why teachers use particular assessment models in their classrooms. The data conveyed various factors that weigh on participants as they interact, instruct, and assess their students. Surprisingly, these factors had varying degrees of influence on each participant’s classroom culture and choice of assessments. Their assessment practice did not fit conveniently into the practices described through the research literature. Of further interest, was the participants’ ability to work within the assessment culture of their schools and still maintain a classroom culture and assessment practice that was of importance to them. Their assessment practice seemed to encompass two goals and provided much data for new insights and models for advancing the conversation on assessment.

Assessment scholars have recommended that new questions be asked concerning the complexity of how teachers relate to assessment (Black, 2015). This study proposed that teachers should be an important resource for this conversation, as it is their everyday decisions in the classroom that create the classroom culture and support student learning. Of importance, was considering teachers’ views and perceptions before making assumptions about their practice. This understanding is essential before discussing how teachers’ assessment attitudes can be altered (Quilter & Gallini, 2000). Only then, can we understand the discrepancies between the beliefs they may espouse and what they actually enact (Olafson & Schraw, 2010).

The process of goal-orientated decision making framed this study because of its interconnecting components. In this study, the participants’ experiences followed a path towards their practice that emphasized

1. Teachers’ Perceptions
2. Instructional Goal Making

3. Teacher Knowledge

The framework was relevant to understanding and analyzing the data because its focus did not exclusively measure the participants’ knowledge about assessment or primarily record their perceptions but instead, the framework sought to understand how these elements intersected in the classroom (Shoenfeld, 2015). The inquiry process endeavored to conduct data and connect the findings to the research question and pertinent literature on assessment.

The research question guiding this study focused on:

*How do teachers describe their assessment practice?*

**Discussion of Findings**

The participants described their experiences using various assessments and the reasoning behind how and why they chose these particular assessments. Their reasoning and focus was student centered and more often, followed the processes of formative assessment. Though the participants had different school contexts to consider, the participants had similar views and concerns for their students. Additionally, all of the school administrations were focused on school sponsored standardized testing. As the research literature highlighted, an important starting point for understanding teachers’ assessment practices was understanding teachers’ perception of the role of assessments. Assessment’s role in instruction was the first thread to be analyzed and it was related to the participants’ perceptions and uses of various types of assessments. Also, these assessments were connected to their classroom culture. Because of the participants’ strong emphasis on their classroom culture, it was studied more than their schools’ assessment cultures. The assessment culture was discussed in relation to its impact on the
participants’ assessment practices and how the assessment culture related to teachers’ input for policy decisions in their school or district. The discussion also focused on the participants’ views of data and data collection and its connection to their practice. The participants recalled their past training and assessment education and their personal memories of being assessed as students. These personal threads were related to student perceptions of assessment and students’ socioemotional connection to assessments. Finally, the participants relayed their perceptions of the future of assessment and its connection to their assessment practices of today. These themes were conceptualized through this one sampling of participants and were connected as a possible path towards teachers’ assessment practices.

**Teachers’ Perceptions**

The purpose, function, or role of assessment can be interpreted in different ways. The participants were asked to explain their perceived role of assessment. The question was meant to be open-ended and not specific. Their answers followed suit by looking to explain the scope of assessment. These views and perceptions become part of the teachers’ orientation towards instruction and assessment (Schoenfeld, 2011a). Three of the participants explained that assessment was primarily to ascertain how well the students learned the material that was presented. The other two participants stated that the role of assessment was more about the teacher’s role.

Teachers’ inner beliefs are an influence on their assessment practices but not the only influence, which encompasses more than just measurement principles (McMillan, 2003). As Lauren explained, the role of assessment is also “to measure a student’s level of investment, work habits, and their inner desire to do their best.” Later in the interviews, the participants’
differing viewpoints converged into agreement. They also stated that the role of assessment was to inform teacher practice. Abby described this point by seeing the “need to teach further or re-teach a topic” and Tara said “for me [assessment] is more as a guide …, like where do we need to go next?”

Teachers take this knowledge and beliefs about their students and learning into their decision-making process and determine how the assessments should be used (MacMillan, 2003). When asked how she planned for assessment, Lauren saw the process as looking “slightly backwards, like what do we want the kids to get out of this?” One step towards planning for formative assessment is designing instruction that provides for students showing evidence of their learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009). When asked how they planned for evidence of learning, each participant explained how it was subject or skill driven. When asked how they looked for evidence of learning, Tara said, “…sometimes it’s a connection between something … if it’s a misconception that was changed.” Her understanding of the student might develop through a process of error analysis, whereby she can share with students how and why they made their mistakes. Melissa described how “they can also explain to a certain extent what they just did and why it actually now makes sense.” Abby explained how when she sees the students struggling, she reteaches, and “I feel like that’s when I can see that they’ve mastered that, when they’re able to do it themselves.” Danielle viewed the evidence as part of a process and said, “By the end, they’re able to meet that rubric, so they’re setting goals for themselves, as well.” Lauren looked for evidence through “a combination of all things. It’s not just one grade, but it’s also not just one conversation, it’s ongoing.” They also referenced the curriculum standards, and when applicable, students’ Individualized Education Plans, or IEP’s, as guides for evidence of learning.
Additionally, the participants referenced their own school’s reading and mathematics program assessments, Star Reading, Star Math, Measures of Academic Progress (MAP), and ultimately the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exam as school required methods to show evidence of learning. These predesigned assessments regularly did not align with the teachers’ pedagogical philosophy and resulted in conflicting assessment practices (Sharkey & Murnane, 2006; Volante et al., 2010). The data began to show that the participants seem to have two assessment practices. One was their own and one was imposed on them. This was not the assessment model the researcher anticipated. There is research literature supporting this type of model, but there is little evidence of this model being used school wide. Possibly, because for more than twenty years, assessments in schools have been discussed, redesigned, and administered with trepidation for score results and concerns for student progress. Finding “perfect” assessments have continued to be elusive for both scholars and administrators. Even though many teachers have experienced positive uses of formative assessments, schools continue to rely on standardized summative assessments. Further studies would be needed to quell the debate over if these assessments could actually translate into improved standardized test scores (Ayala et al., 2008; Brown et al., 2015).

Administrators should be aware of teachers varying views on the role of assessment. Though the use of mandated standardized tests will not change for some time to come, understanding the use of formative assessment could bring about new instructional strategies for many assessment requirements. Findings ways to come together in a collaborative environment, to discuss assessment philosophies, and share stories of positive experiences could be the start of informal professional learning communities. Bringing the autonomous nature of the classroom to a collaborative, team approach could provide more opportunities to visit each other’s classroom
and share resources. Abby’s positive interactions within her grade’s data meetings and Lauren’s strong grade level team approach were positive steps towards bringing differing viewpoints closer together.

### Instructional Goal Making

The first part of Schoenfeld’s (2011a) decision making model discusses teachers’ instructional goal making, which leads to the planning and use of assessments. However, in the age of high-stakes standardized testing, teachers have fewer opportunities to use a variety of assessments. Many schools have extensive use of standardized tests, as do many districts across the state and across the country. Even now, after years of testing experience, schools feel the need to “teach to the test.” As part of the school’s preparation for the spring testing season, Danielle’s school starts reviewing MCAS questions with their students in the fall. All of the participants reported how their school teaches their writing program to mirror the impending test. Regardless of how the teachers feel about standardized assessments, the external pressures from the administration and/or parents force teachers to use assessment practices which do not always match their own philosophies (McMillan, 2003). The participants echoed this sentiment because they see the negatives impacts of high-stakes testing. The students can “be anxious … and … may freeze,” may not perform well, because they are not “great test-takers,” have the pressure of “one grade,” and students may be at a “different developmental level to understand those questions.”

The participants also saw the value for the data collected through the standardized test, which will be discussed later. On further discussions, they revealed it was not the paper and pencil element of the tests that bothered them. They often used this method, but it was how the students was asked to show their learning in static ways. They described how a variety of
assessments were more effective to show learning because as Tara says, her view on assessment goes beyond what a test can show. She takes into account all of the students’ pretest work and their error corrections after the test. Melissa tries to use assessments that have a “kinesthetic” element to them. She wants learning to encompass the whole child and maybe, have some fun learning, as well. Danielle tries to find opportunities for her students to clarify their thoughts. She wants the expectations of their thought processes to be developmentally appropriate. Lauren has changed science assessment to lab reports, in order for students to describe and explain their understanding versus a fill-in-the-blank test. Abby’s school uses benchmark testing in writing for their formative value, whereby the students demonstrate their writing abilities and then, enhance them through subsequent activities.

These various instructional models, described by the participants, show a distinction that occurs between the goals of large-scale standard assessments and small-scale classroom assessments, such as student performance versus students grasping learning objectives (Brookhart, 2004). These small-scale assessments’ goals can be tailored to fit the individual learner and can be designed to develop over time. This view of assessment’s goal is dependent on the instructional decisions made by the teacher and would be part of the teacher’s orientation towards this process. This manifests through the assessment process planning and the classroom culture maintained by the teacher. The assessment models listed above also include another important element of formative assessment and that is, providing feedback to the students about the work they’ve completed (Black & Wiliam, 2009).

It is important to note that supporters of standardized testing might question the validity of these formative assessments. Are they measurable in a standardized format? Do they effectively measure learning? Would these types of assessments be viable in a large-scale testing
situation? Should these assessments remain exclusively in the classroom learning process? It is a critical element that the assessments have sufficient rigor and validity, as well as support quality learning practices (Black et al., 2010). These questions refer us back to the role of assessment and should not be discounted. This difficult task of designing assessments to meet all of the criteria must start with questions asking what should the assessment test for (Chudowsky & Pellegino, 2003).

The participants of this study provided some interesting assessment processes and welcomed the chance to explore other processes. Teacher educators, professional development planners, and assessment experts could fill this need and plan for opportunities to study assessment practices with teachers. They may consider the teachers as research practitioners and include the teachers’ experiences and grade level expertise as a resource. Too often researchers view teachers’ knowledge of assessment from a deficit perspective (Howley et al., 2013), instead of a resource. At the same time, the teachers could have the opportunity to share ideas and practices that may clear up inconsistencies and inspire innovation. A teacher’s perspective towards these questions about the development of assessment practices also affect the development of the classroom culture. This environment is created to prepare students and support learning, and is reflected in the choice of assessment.

Even though, teachers may espouse the benefits of formative assessment, they may not have the flexibility in their instructional schedule or the resources to move beyond their traditional methods of assessment. Melissa reported that she tells colleagues, “you have to make the time!” They may have the instructional goals and assessment knowledge to create a classroom culture that encourages certain forms of assessment, but may find it difficult to maintain and so in consequence, return to past practices (Sach, 2012).
The classroom space in elementary schools remains the teachers’ domain and reflects their pedagogical philosophy and practices. Here the classroom reflects the assessment goals, methodologies, and teacher’s perception of the students (Stiggins & Conklin, 1992). The participants described the importance they gave to their classroom structure and culture. They viewed this area as a place to foster student/teacher relationships, the socioemotional support of students in the assessment process, and the positive value of small group instruction. The interactions of teachers and students create opportunities for teachers to learn about their students understanding by engaging in forms of interpretive listening (Black & Wiliam, 2009). This attention to the interaction of teachers, students, and peer groups is another important element of formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 2009).

Teachers can note the reactions of students in the learning process by knowing the situations that may cause students to have a difficult reaction to the assessment process. The participants described how the environment needs to take into account “the emotional state of the learner” (Melissa); “take away the anxiety” of the learner (Danielle); and provide opportunities to get students excited about learning and “have a sense of pride and accomplishment” (Tara). These observations occur more frequently when they are encouraged and fostered.

The classroom can also be a welcoming cultural and equitable environment. The instruction and assessment can be tailored to embrace the multiple backgrounds of students (Popham, 2007). This cultural inclusion would be appreciated by both parents and students. In the participants’ districts, the classroom culture was geared more to inclusion and co-teaching models for special education students than multi-culturalism. Here the special education teachers interact with all students, not just singling certain students out. As Tara explained of her special education co-teacher, “She’ll jump in and she’ll teach or she’ll remediate, and it’s not just like
these are your kids and these are mine.” This enhances cohesiveness and comradery with both teachers and students. This is also a philosophy Melissa agrees with because if students are showing they need help with “a certain skill” it does not make a difference which teacher helps the student. With the participants’ emphasis on small group work and flexible skill or strategy groups, more targets for learning can be addressed within the classroom.

The co-teaching model and student inclusion models should be explored by teachers and administrators. Having professional development on these topics can open avenues for more specific discussions that may be relevant to the context of each particular school. The opportunity to have a culturally sensitive curriculum, acknowledge gender biases, understand LBGT concerns, provide a rich environment for ELL learners, as well as welcome disabled students, all contribute to a healthy classroom and school environment. Within the classroom culture, finding ways to meet the needs of all the students through authentic assessments can be a challenge.

The participants described their positive experiences using small group instruction as a means to assess students individually and more specifically. Melissa felt the small groups allowed her more opportunities to provide a variety of activities, which included forms of data collection. Abby explained how she works on specific skills using resources that are of interest to each group, for example a particular reading selection. The small number of students also allows time for the teacher to create models of positive student interactions with the teacher and their peers, as well as understand what the students know at that moment of time (Pryor & Torrance, 1998). Danielle sees the value of students “working with their peers to reinforce what’s going on or if they have a question,” to help each other.
Tara has seen positive results from organizing flexible ability grouping for skill and concept enhancement. She does not keep them static, but changes them frequently, and this gives her an opportunity to “pull a strategy group to just go over that skill.” Lauren used a similar tactic in her math period. She explained how she spontaneously started a new system of loosely grouping students because she “wanted to work with each group” in a different way.

These examples of instructional goals, the resources they choose, and the teachers’ orientations towards instruction and learning have pointed the participants’ classrooms of this study towards a formative assessment orientation. They have made instructional design choices that provide evidence for learning (i.e. a narrative writing assignment); have made efforts to clarify for students the criteria needed to have successful assignments (i.e. the use of rubrics); have activated interactions between teachers, students, and peer groups (i.e. small group instruction); and have found ways to provide meaningful feedback (i.e. error analysis of a test), which are all elements of formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 2009). However, the study does not conclude here. These teachers do utilize many opportunities to use formative assessment in their classroom, but is it part of the overall assessment culture and a part of most teachers’ assessment practice of their school?

The assessment culture of a school is usually set forth by the school and/or district administration. Though teachers may have different educational and instructional backgrounds, these differences can be brought together to form a positive assessment culture, whereby teachers are well-informed and assessments are used with purpose and relevancy (Popham, 2007; Stiggins & Conklin, 1992). This unified front of administration and faculty is not always the case. Sometimes, teachers are resistant to changing past practices and ignore their administration’s attempts to implement new forms of assessment (Valli & Buese, 2007). Each of the participants
described colleagues resistant to changing their summative assessment practices of using years old textbooks and chapter reviews. As Lauren stated, the administration may encourage “interactive” forms of assessment but do not know how to explain what this means. If the teachers are unclear of the assessment’s efficacy or view the assessment as an add-on to their instruction, they usually continue to use traditional, drill and practice, teacher directed, summative assessments (Yan & Cheng, 2015). Also, when the administration has mandated too many reforms, teachers may begin to become resistant to new ideas, including the use of formative assessments (Vali & Buese, 2007). Additionally, teachers may feel the pressure of high-stakes testing weakens their instructional decision-making in the classroom (Vali & Buese, 2007). One of the participants touched on this negative situation by explaining, “Those [administrative pressures] really play into it as far as attitude. A lot of what we’re doing is seen as extra, as aggravation, as anxiety building, versus a tool just to use.”

As previously described, the participants of this study do use a variety of formative assessments and innovative techniques to engage and measure learning. However, the assessment culture of their schools prefers to focus on school sponsored standardized tests. Abby explained, “They do not use classroom assessments to determine [student] progress.” The schools rely on the MCAS scores and other commercially authored standardized tests to prepare students for testing. Melissa stated, “I think we put a lot of emphasis on MCAS scores. We need to step away from that.” Also, Tara described how the assessments took from instructional time because, “… I mean it was, it felt like we were constantly testing the kids.”

Also, there can be competing assessment goals that come from the administration and parents, which can negatively impact the assessment culture (Davis & Neitzel, 2011). Danielle described how her district’s administration professes that “assessments are deemed vital,” but
they have not affected who gets funding in the district. For example, her grade received 30 Chromebooks to be shared between 150 students. In another district, Tara described her school administration’s rolling emphasis as, first writing “was a focus a few years ago. The focus shifted to math this year” but “I think as a district we’re focused on reading.” Abby, from a well performing district, explained that the superintendent is looking for 5% increase in math on the students’ benchmark tests and said, “Teachers don’t think we can measure everything in one test. I agree.”

Changing the assessment culture is a process of cooperation and investment on all sides. Teachers can become discouraged when their efforts feel disregarded. Often it is the administration, or researchers, that are trying to change the practices of the teachers, but at times the teachers’ voices should be included because they are relevant to the conversation (Sach, 2012). For example, in one school, the teachers did see the value of data collection, however, as Tara and her colleagues opined, “The data is only good depending on what you do with it.” Tara and her colleague presented their view at a faculty meeting. They felt compelled to say how the school’s assessment process was interrupting instruction. It is important to examine the role of teacher input in this conversation. Are there models of teacher interactions that provide a forum for teachers to discuss issues and concerns? Then, how do they share these concerns with their administrators? Of interest to this study, was how the different participants’ school administrators addressed their teachers’ concerns.

The concerns reported by the participants are not new in schools. Regardless of the teachers’ viewpoints, sometimes administrators are not ready to discuss the decisions they feel they must make. If there is a possibility of bringing the faculty into the important policy and curriculum conversations, the administration should provide agreed upon avenues for faculty
involvement. It has been shown that the assessment culture sets the tone and support for various instructional and assessment philosophies (Klinger & Rogers, 2011). When teachers are isolated, they may become resistant to follow the assessment culture and revert to known or former practices (Davis & Neitzel, 2011; Valli & Buese, 2007). A supportive environment, whereby teachers have opportunities for input into some of the decisions of the school and work with administrators toward a unified understanding of assessments, can form assessment practices that are effective, productive, and incorporate the school’s traditions and missions (Jurasaite-Harbison & Rex, 2010).

The five participants of the study, experienced different levels of acceptance of their professional input and instructional goal making. Their comments are good examples of the inroads schools can take to balance their assessment practices and culture. Tara’s faculty, as reported earlier, had concerns about the number of standardized tests the school was giving each term to students. The administration took the issue under consideration, changed some of the tests requirements to optional, and presently, allows individual teachers to decide on the use of particular benchmark tests. They also listened to teachers’ professional opinions and provided a math coach for students needing individual attention. This type of collaborative response can begin to unify the assessment culture and discontinue competing goals (Davis & Neitzel, 2011).

Three other participants also saw the positive effects, both professionally and motivationally, of having their professional input factored into school process and policy decisions. Lauren’s strong grade level team approach provides a collaborative forum, in which recommendations are formed. These recommendations are a valued component to their curriculum coordinator’s decisions. Abby has discussed how her present group of students with ADHD have not responded well to the testing required by her school. She presented her concerns
and the administration has given her some flexibility to change the testing process and frequency. Melissa also has the flexibility to interject her professional judgement and add to standard performance profiles “to explain the child as a whole,” because she felt the strictly quantitative approach was not accurate. The administrators, department heads, and team leaders function more effectively when all members of the school, subject group, or grade team participate and work in concert.

Danielle, considered a teacher leader in her school, has had a different experience. She has made recommendations as to collaborative ways to analyze the schools standardized test data. She thinks her past administrator would have welcomed new ideas, but the new administrator does not. Instead, issues are not clarified and teachers have begun to say, “… there’s times when it becomes difficult for all of us to say why are we doing this?” A lack of clarification and dialogue with teachers removes voices that could be highly relevant to the discussion (Sach, 2012).

The participants described ways that teachers can talk together about their issues and concerns. Danielle expressed the desire to have collaboration and Lauren described a strong collaborative process in her school. These wide differences show administrators’ support, or lack of support to provide time for teachers to meet. For example, in Tara’s school the lunch schedules were designated by floor numbers and each floor had different grade levels. There were few chances for one grade level of teachers to meet together as a whole group. The teachers requested a change in the lunch schedule and the administration agreed. Now Tara’s colleagues can meet regularly to share ideas and resources during the school day, as well as after school.

These mostly positive stories were part of the process of sharing professional opinions under circumstances that are not ideal. The five participants do not agree with their
administrations’ continued reliance on standardized testing. Administrators can provide opportunities to discuss and share their goals with teachers and provide avenues for teachers to provide constructive input. This requires a type of leadership that can navigate the negative input, as well as the positive input. Two models of grade level collaboration have been successful in the context of this study’s sample. One school has each grade level meet regularly, plan together, discuss pros and cons of instructional ideas, and collaborate with the curriculum coordinator for assessment design and expectations. Another school has frequent data meetings to discuss standardized testing data from interim, benchmark, and MCAS tests. In these meetings, the curriculum coordinator shares concerns with student results and tries to collaborate on strategies to address the concerns. Even if the suggestions are more theoretical than practical, the teachers appreciate the collaborative approach to creating a plan.

Administrations that staunchly adhere to one philosophy will never have harmony within their schools. Instead, finding time to create collaborative professional learning communities should become a priority in schools. For example, how the administration communicates the goal of data collection and data meetings can be viewed as a productive enterprise or it can be viewed as interrupting and another form of intrusive administrative supervision (Valli & Buese, 2007). By going beyond the pressures of standardized testing and revolving reforms, teachers can delve more deeply into their internal beliefs and the rationale of their assessment practice (Duncan & Noonan, 2007; Frey & Schmitt, 2010). Clarifying and understanding teachers’ instructional goals, orientations, and knowledge through a collaborative process can be the first step towards bringing synchrony into the school’s assessment goals, orientation, and resources.

The term data-driven decision making is a common term in education. It refers to the decisions made because of data that has been collected from standardized tests, interim or
benchmark testing, and information collected by teachers. There is a push to analyze data in
teacher meetings and administrative meetings to look for instructional gaps and laps in progress.
The participants all saw the purpose and value of collecting data. Lauren appreciated that data is
“not arbitrary, you know what the standard is.” Danielle finds data analysis “vital … It does
drive my instruction.” Melissa agrees because she will “break the data down, and really look at
what it means.” Abby explained how she prefers to collect data from a variety of sources. Tara
concluded, “And then we review the data, and we make adjustments as needed.” In Tara’s
school, the data showed a need for additional math remediation for some students and so, the
school hired a math coach.

The teachers also experienced the “endless” quest to collect a constant stream of data. As
previously noted, Tara’s district acknowledged they were over-assessing the students. Lauren
noted how teachers barely have time to correct all of the students’ work before they can enter the
data. Abby sees her students being over-assessed and not doing their best work. Danielle saw a
need to use the data more productively by connecting the data through the grades to create a
continuum. Melissa thought educators need to ask again, “What are we looking for?” In other
words, collecting data without a stated purpose in not necessarily productive.

Instead, of data-driven decision making, the focus could be on decision-driven evidence
collection. Decision-driven evidence collection looks to support particular inferences to be
studied (Wiliam, 2014). The concept is to build supported inferences before carrying them into
instructional use and to identify a range of possible states of achievement (Wiliam, 2014). Critics
might wonder how the criteria will be formed to start this process. Melissa and Abby had
remarked, which could be a possible reply, if 10 well-written, targeted questions can provide the
data to show learning, why use 20 repetitive ones? Their knowledge of assessment would
provide the understanding to create well-written questions. Where do teachers acquire this knowledge and what is this connection to their practice? Research theory has not brought together a definitive assessment practice that encompasses all learning styles and agreed upon learning objectives. This could be because schools and their many components, which include social, political, knowledge, and relationship components, need theories that have flexibility to encompass the changing circumstances and context of situations (Schwab, 1969). Teachers can gather together to share experiences and strategies to improve practices of their school (Robinson et al., 2014) and this can enhance the professional discourse on the development of future assessments (Jurasaitė-Harbison & Rex, 2010).

**Teacher Knowledge**

In the past, teachers’ pre-service instructional education at the under-graduate level has lacked comprehensive courses on the effective use of assessment (Heritage, 2007; Quilter & Gallini, 2000). Of the five participants, only the youngest participant had a memorable undergraduate course in assessment. The participants’ graduate level courses did include some assessment topics but they did not feel the courses became truly applicable. Even though research has promoted the benefits of formative assessment, many preservice programs have not helped teachers become proficient, including the present generation of textbooks (Shoenfeld, 2015). The five participants did not have a positive view of their professional development experiences, as these PD courses were not generally applicable. Their most productive education on student learning and assessment came from working with colleagues. These opportunities to discuss, ask questions, and seek advice were more productive to any of their course work and subsequent professional development classes. Each described the benefits of grade level
collaborations and mentoring. This model for teacher education was represented in this study’s sample and ranged from strong grade level teams to occasional grade level conversations and collaborations.

Teachers make assessment decisions every day in one form or another, and so, this gives a strong argument for quality assessment education (Harlen, 2007). Providing access to quality assessment education and training should become a priority for school districts. There are a variety of teacher education models a school can employ, which should include year-long discussions to assess and adjust practices along the way. The models should also include formative assessment elements, such as, peer interactions and self-reflection. When teachers have the opportunity to look closely at their own practices in a collaborative setting, they may voice concerns, contribute to changing themselves and colleagues, and look to see varied perspectives about assessment practices (Black et al., 2004).

All teachers’ educational experiences began when they were young students. These years provided personal memories that have significant influences on teachers’ future instructional and assessment practices (Quilter & Gallini, 2000). They may recall unfair grading-practices of their youth but still use the same practices as teachers (Bonner & Chen, 2009; Guskey, 2006). They may disregard the constructivist views of learning for the traditional view of grading as a management tool (Bonner & Chen, 2009). Possibly, young teachers carry the philosophy of their pre-service education on assessment with them to their own classrooms (Mitton-Kuckner et al., 2015).

Danielle described an unexpected positive assessment experience. A high standardized test math score, the highest in her fourth-grade class, “helped the start of my better school years.” Before that, she says she was an uninspired and uninterested student. Lauren found her grade
school years of standardized testing as uneventful and not being “overly exciting.” However, she does understand the anxiety her students have about testing. Melissa had negative experiences become positive through the dedication of her middle school teachers and explained that in the beginning, “I remember studying and staying after school and not getting a really good grade.” Her teachers’ dedication to her development still touches her today. Abby recognized that “just because of my own personal, my own struggles with standardized testing,” she has a certain sensitivity towards her own students’ struggles.

The participants gave their teachers credit for helping them and giving them added attention towards positive results. The participants readily shared these personal memories with their students to encourage perseverance and hard work. Tara found that she learned about her own learning style by starting “to appreciate that everybody learns in different ways” and passes this type of self-awareness on to her students. The participants’ positive reaction to a negative situation is a valuable component of assessment practice, as all students can learn from the meaning behind their teachers’ experiences. Professional development leaders could incorporate the importance of personal memories into their presentations. By providing time for teachers to reflect on their past and to be self-reflective on their present practice, these self-reflection exercises could help improve the teachers’ personal goals for future practices. The participants also saw the importance of remembering their own experiences and its connection to understanding the socioemotional experiences of their students.

The participants introduced the importance of recognizing and maintaining their students’ socioemotional development and its connection to learning and assessment. They valued and fostered good relationships with their students. The impact of anxiety was discussed because of how it can derail a students’ performance on all forms of assessment. In particular, was the
participants’ worry about their students not testing well during the school’s pre-scheduled, mandated test times. These stressful situations stay with students through adulthood (Quilter & Gallini, 2000). Additionally, grade-only and score specific practices make at-risk students more vulnerable (Rieg, 2007). The process of incorporating productive assessment practices is key to positive learning and assessment experiences, and provides opportunities for students to be successful (Rieg, 2007). The participants’ responses detailed how they sought to provide stability, encouragement, and success for their students.

Lauren expressed the importance of her students’ reactions in the classroom and stated, “I think number one is having the kids’ feedback from them in terms of their body language and their verbal feedback and what they’re able to produce.” She worried about student anxiety and the many causes of student anxiety. She wonders if parents and teachers give “mixed messages and a lot of expectations that maybe developmentally aren’t appropriate.” For Abby, she described the need for a trusting relationship as, “where they’re willing to come to me with any problems, but also respectful, so that they’re following expectations in the classroom and willing to work … during the learning process.” She also spoke of the balance teachers must provide between student understanding, student responsibilities, and teacher expectations. Danielle expressed the same sentiment, as she felt it was important that the students be responsible for their learning and involved in their learning. However, she also saw how the “moment that captures when a student really understands,” is connected to that student’s level of anxiety.

Melissa found that students respond best when she identifies which modality is ideal for them. She supports their anxieties by reminding them assessments are “a learning opportunity … and mistakes are a part of learning.” Tara also shows the students they can do things in a variety of ways. “I tell them we’re expanding your tool box… And I want you to be aware that there are
multiple ways to solve a problem.” These important attempts to help students make connections
to their own learning and the process of learning and assessment rally student effort and
motivation.

Teachers of today have to take students’ anxieties seriously. Being aware of students’
mental effort, how hard they try, and students’ overt effort, the actual amount of work
accomplished, is also an essential component of assessment and learning (Brookhart, 1997).
There should be a balance between the need to collect data and acquiring information on the
students’ actual level of improvement (Klinger & Rogers, 2011). McMillan (2003) further
suggests that teachers need to know “when their students are on task and trying to achieve, when
they are working hard to perform, thinking about answers to questions, and are meaningfully
involved in class discussions” (p.39). Unfortunately, these important components of student
learning cannot be easily measured or quantified.

These topics are ideal for developing plans to prepare students emotionally, as well as
academically, for the long process of standardized testing. Recognizing how to alleviate student
anxiety was important to the participants and could be a good model for teacher training.
Administrators should find time for teachers to share positive stories of how they successfully
prepared their students. Melissa has developed her own MCAS “bootcamp.” Also, teachers can
share how they helped students overcome their anxieties, as some students cry at the thought of
taking exams. These collaborative efforts, supported by administrators, provide comradery and
support for all involved in what has become a truly stressful time for schools.

The final step in the development of the assessment process, is the assessment practice.
This too has a complex process of its own and varies between teachers. Throughout the data
analysis, it became apparent how these five participants had more similarities to their approaches to assessment, than differences. Their insights have relevant implications for practice.

**Implications for Practice**

The participants’ comments throughout the study showed the teachers’ tensions and conflicting assessment practices balanced between the instructional needs of their students and the external calls for data (Sharkey & Murnane, 2006; Volante et al., 2010). How teachers develop their assessment practice may or may not be in synchrony with their schools’ assessment culture, but will often be aligned with their beliefs, orientations, and past experiences (Quilter & Gallini, 2000; Trauth-Nare & Buck, 2011; Schoenfeld, 2011a). It was proposed that teachers’ everyday instructional and assessment decision making, which makes up their assessment practice, is part of a path of influences. These influences, which include their perceived role and uses of assessments, the assessment culture of their school, their ability to contribute to the policies and curriculum decisions of their school, their view of data and data collection, their education, their personal memories as a student, and their concern for their students, all contributed to their assessment practice. How these influences affect practice depends on their personal goals for instruction, their orientation as a teacher, the material resources of their school, and the assessment knowledge they possess (Schoenfeld, 2011a). This path is illustrated in Figure 5.

The participants of this study seemed to come to terms with the fact that students need to be prepared and that standardized testing will not be phased out anytime soon. Because of this understanding, the participants seem to employ two assessment practices. In one practice, they created a classroom culture to teach the topics of the curriculum and used a variety of formative
assessments. They looked to design instruction that provides evidence of learning; clarified learning intentions and criteria for success; activated interactions between teachers, students, and peer groups; and provided meaningful feedback for student work (Black & Wiliam, 2009). The participants tried to vary their assessment models to be authentic to the goals of learning and motivating for the students. They all discussed their classroom culture as a place to build warm relationships with their students, in order to enhance the positive socioemotional development of their students.

Figure 5. The Path to Decision Making and Assessment Practice

The participants also had a second part of their assessment practice. They had to prepare students for school sponsored standardized tests. In order to do so, they utilized interim and benchmark tests, gave students practice through commercially produced computer programs,
such as Star Reading, Star Math, and Measures of Academic Progress (MAP), and gave students preparatory lessons throughout the year, mirroring topics and skills anticipated for the spring MCAS tests. They also tried to find ways to integrate these needed skills into the students’ regular skill sets and instructional goals. They used writing prompts and practiced math facts just as they always would. The difference was the timing of their lessons and the intensity to ensure student achievement. The participants worried about their students’ anxiety and reactions to the pressure these tests can elicit. However, they did appreciate the opportunities to collect data, as Melissa described, “the hard evidence.” Although this ultimate data from the MCAS exam remains unknown until the fall of the next year, Danielle thought there could be a way to collaborate with teachers in other grades and look for patterns within a continuum.

The participants navigated the complex relationships of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to provide a positive assessment culture within their classroom. Sometimes, this was accomplished with the overt support of their administration and sometimes, there was little support for their issues and concerns. Though some of their colleagues have not changed their assessment practices of the past, these participants strove to use innovative and authentic assessments. They did so, even though their administrators do not use this information as a basis for the schools’ “student progress.” They do so, because they feel their assessments should be “mindful” and “meaningful.”

**Recommendations for Practice**

This study sought to understand the assessment practices of teachers within the upper elementary school grades, working north and south of a metropolitan area. The participants gave many similar accounts of their experiences and uses of assessments. The participants shared the details of their assessment practice and expressed their issues and concerns with the assessment
culture of their schools. Their insightful comments can provide many recommendations for future practice. Three salient points became of great interest to the researcher, which could be valuable information for educators, administrators, policy makers, and educators of teachers’ future decisions about assessment in our schools. First, was the relationship of the school’s assessment culture to the participants’ classroom culture. Additionally, was the participants’ innovative accommodations and integration of test-taking skills into their assessment practice. Lastly, was the need for quality teacher assessment education.

The study began by seeking to hear how the participants would describe their experiences and utilization of assessments. The researcher had an assumption that the assessment culture of their schools would have a significant influence on their classroom culture. In this sample of teachers, this was not the case. They reported how they sought to create a classroom culture that emphasized their own beliefs and orientations towards formative assessment, even though their districts’ overarching goals and emphases were showing student advancement on summative standardized assessments. The participants sought to find ways to redesign, accommodate, and integrate the preparatory pressures from the impending MCAS exams. They found innovative ways to collect data and practice skills needed to increase exam scores. Also, some of the participants experienced using summative assessment data in a formative manner, through rubrics and test error analysis. They also lobbied to decrease the amount of computer practice exam sessions and required benchmark exams. The teachers also found ways to collaborate more with colleagues, in order to share resources and ideas.

Some of these models for instruction, assessment, and teacher collaboration were already in place, some were recently implemented, and some were not available to every one of the five participants. It would be valuable to revisit these topics with these teachers at a later date, as well
as teachers of other districts, to ascertain the overall success of these models. It would also be valuable for more administrators to incorporate time for teacher collaboration to share positive instructional and assessment practices, either in grade level teams or professional learning communities, encourage teacher leadership within grade level teams, and open avenues for teacher involvement in policy and curriculum decisions, which could improve and enhance their school’s assessment culture.

Next of interest, was the participants’ innovative accommodations and integration of test-taking skills into their assessment practice. The participants described how they disagreed with the amount of test taking the students were required to do and some of the assessment models used. Not only did the participants know they had to follow the standards set for student learning, they knew they had to prepare the students for the arduous task of sitting for hours of exams. These teachers shared their innovative ideas of incorporating mundane skill tasks into creative writings, projects, lab reports, kinesthetic activities, and peer interactions. This focus on reverse engineering the task to find a different way to collect data-worthy material was employed in some manner by the participants. Delving deeper into decision-driven evidence collection (Wiliam, 2014) models could create innovative and effective instructional tools that require more than a pencil or a keyboard.

The participants expressed the need for more experiences with all types of assessment. Professional development and professional learning communities could use long term and/or short term study sessions to explore assessment models that could be an asset to measuring authentic learning and formulating quality data. Teachers can also participate in action research to study assessment practices and provide input as scholar-practitioners because this information
becomes more valuable than simply giving teachers recommendations for practice (Torrance & Pryor, 2001).

The last salient point resulting from this study, was the continued gap in quality teacher assessment education. All of the participants said they would welcome professional development on assessment practice that was of high standard, rigor, and had immediate practical applicability. They wanted to know what was new and innovative. They also wanted “experts” in the field or master teachers to show them how to implement new assessments effectively and correctly. The participants also thought more teacher education was needed to convince their reluctant colleagues to try new methods and models. Providing opportunities for teachers to obtain in-depth pedagogical knowledge creates assessment practices that are deep rather than superficial (Sachs, 2012). When teachers have opportunities to join on-going professional development or professional learning communities to discuss beliefs, share ideas, be reflective, and plan future assessment strategies, they are more likely to react favorably to new experiences (Robinson et al., 2014). As teachers realize the noticeable gains in student learning, they are more likely to continue new ideas, reflect on progress, and revise past practices (Guskey, 2002; Robinson et al., 2014).

Providing high quality professional development can also include professional learning communities studying assessment. These gatherings can be informal, as well as be for a specific topic or a year-long study. In this forum, the teachers can find resources within the group and from experts outside of the group. Administrators can be instrumental in supporting the groups’ endeavors and designate times to meet regularly.

There remains a great need for teacher assessment education and this area is of interest to the researcher. This study confirmed much of the current literature that effective teachers prefer
to use some forms of formative assessment and to use summative assessment formatively. The literature also describes studies, whereby teachers and researchers have collaborated for positive changes in assessment practices and increased student achievement. These participants developed their understanding of assessment through their own study and working with like-minded colleagues. Four years ago, it was reported that 130 Massachusetts college professors, from many prestigious universities, signed a petition to change the focus of standardized testing (Strauss, 2013). To date, the tests may have changed to some degree, but the pressure and over assessing of students has not. These study participants’ desire for relevant, quality professional development and needed college teacher education programs is inspiring this researcher to continue to investigate and expand research knowledge, and build expertise in this underserved field in education.

**Suggestions for Further Study**

The findings of this study provided a variety of topics to study further. As suggested above, the relationship of the assessment culture and the classroom culture could be examined in more depth. Are there avenues to research that can bring about a deeper understanding of what constitutes a positive assessment culture? Could this be approached from a leadership perspective, a professional development perspective, and/or an assessment theory perspective?

Additionally, suggestions for furthering this study might include expanding the sample size and increasing the study’s time frame. This study recruited five female teachers to discuss their experiences and assessment practices. Increasing the sample size of teachers, including male teachers, and expanding the geographic area could bring about more varied views and perspectives for analysis. Additionally, this inquiry entailed one 60-minute interview during the
teachers’ winter term. Increasing the number of interviews and conducting them in various times of the year could show changes in perspectives, especially just before or just after the school sponsored standardized exam periods (Polly et al., 2014).

Conclusion

“All social movements involve conflicts which are reflected intellectually in controversies. It would not be a sign of health if such an important social interest as education were not also an arena of struggles, practical and theoretical.”

John Dewey (1938)

The role of assessment in our educational system has created as many questions as answers to how our schools utilize and value assessment models and processes. This research study endeavored to seek out an understanding of teachers’ experiences and uses of assessments and the connection this has to student learning and assessment practice. The study sought to bring forth new information that could become part of the conversation needed before ideological shifts can occur. The research literature shows the benefits of using a variety of assessment models. The literature also points to divergent perspectives between those supporting standardized summative assessments and those supporting formative assessment. Is there a compromise? This study proposed that teachers make a variety of instructional and assessment decisions, which form their practice. Understanding what is guiding these decisions helps build connections and provides answers.

The formation of a qualitative interview study began the process towards conducting and analyzing the data. The theoretical framework, based on Schoenfeld’s theory of goal-orientated
decision making, described how decisions are formed through a problem-solving process. This process, in the educational setting, provided a firm standing to compare participants’ experiences and assessment decisions in their practice. The study recruited five experienced teachers and conducted data through individual one hour interviews. Their experiences and perspectives informed the study of the current assessment climate and became the basis for comparing the similarities and differences of practice within the study sample.

The participants described their perspectives on multiple positive and negative issues surrounding their assessment practice. Their comments were reported in thematic groupings and related subthemes. These thematic groupings were framed theoretically on the basis that assessment practice is an evolving process stemming from the teacher’s instructional goal making, the teacher’s orientation toward instruction and student development, the resources available to the teacher, and the assessment knowledge of the teacher (Schoenfeld, 2011a). This supposition emphasizes the connection of these components more than one superseding another (Schoenfeld, 2011a). The data uncovered more similarities between the perspectives in the study group, than differences.

After analyzing the data, the researcher proposed that understanding the assessment decision making process first comes from determining the participants perceived role of assessment. Initially, it could have been proposed that these perspectives come from the emphasis of their school’s assessment culture. Instead, upon analysis of the data, it was clear that the teachers’ orientation towards the learner’s development was the basis for their views. When they gave examples of their classroom assessments, their emphasis was on the tone of their classroom culture and the teacher/student relationship. Providing an environment to foster
conceptual development and practice skills was more important to the teachers, than a test score. This emphasis became the basis for subsequent themes.

The participants organically split the conversation about their uses of assessment into classroom formative assessments and school sponsored mandated standardized testing. Their views of standardized testing were discussed first as this type of testing was stated as the schools’ preferred mode of measuring “student progress.” Though these teachers work in various schools, all of the schools are part of Massachusetts’ state mandated testing system. This system places pressure on administrators to improve scores yearly, and in turn, the pressure permeates the assessment culture. However, these particular teachers were able to separate their own classroom culture from their school’s assessment culture, to some degree. The participants designed their own assessment models to coincide with their students’ needs and stressed the importance of small group instruction as another means to address the misconceptions and gaps in skills.

Generally, the participants’ comments about the schools’ assessment culture were not completely positive. The participants agreed there was an over-reliance on standardized testing methods and had a concern for over-assessing students. In some of the schools, the teachers’ input and professional opinions were valued and utilized and in other schools it was not utilized. This important element of the assessment culture became a subtheme and was related to the teachers’ perspective of its influence towards the tone of the assessment culture. When the participants felt a part of the school’s policy and instructional decision making process, they seemed to adapt better to the pressures of standardized testing and their view of working within the testing process. The participants who described a school that did not give teachers a voice in the school’s decisions reported a level of discouragement and disengagement by teachers.
The participants’ assessment education, their personal memories of being assessed, and the socioemotional element of the students in relation to assessments were explored and correlated. The participants’ reliance on colleagues for assessment support was reported. Then, their memories of being a student provided a basis for understanding their students’ socioemotional responses to the assessment process. The participants used their experiences as examples to share with their students. They did so because of the many students in their care who have shown anxiety and stress over the assessment process. The participants reported the relevance of the students’ responses to the assessment environment, especially when the response has a notable effect on the test-taking session.

To close the interview, participants were asked about their perspectives for the future of assessments. They saw the conflicting need to acquire data and provide ways to measure the authentic learning of their students. The ideas expressed were to “have more student choices” (Abby); to “really take into account the learner” (Melissa); to make changes, whereby “the emphasis on testing needs to decrease, but the quality of testing needs to increase” (Danielle); and finally, “like instruction, it should be meaningful” (Tara). These views of the future of assessment were already reflected in their present assessment practices. Lauren, who expressed a different view, reflected on a desire to stay the course with the assessment culture of her school and not to look for changes, “for the sake of changing.” Her school’s strong, collaborative team approach seems to have a system that supports her colleagues’ questions and concerns.

The assessment practice of these five participants has been the focus of this doctoral research study. Their practices have been outlined step by step, connecting both theory and practice. Their quite similar perceptions of their students, classrooms, and schools have been the basis to understanding their perspectives, orientations, and the role of assessment for their
students. Their assessment practice has been developed through a path of experiences and external factors that have varying influences, which have been described in great detail through the data and subsequent analyses. Every day, the participants have made a myriad of decisions within their practice, both small instructional decisions and larger curriculum based decisions (Shoenfeld, 2011a).

Though this study is limited by the five participants and their individual interviews, three implications for practice were gleaned from the analyses and connected to the findings of this study. These important contributions from the participants about assessment practice could be explored further. The topics were the varying relationships of the school assessment culture to the classroom culture, the integration of formative assessment models, methods, and strategies to improve learning and test taking skills, and lastly, the development of quality professional development and/or professional learning communities to address the implementation of effective assessments. The participants showed that what was needed, was the formation of a supportive environment to encourage conversations about assessment, how students think, and how students learn (Kinzer & Taft, 2012). These perspectives should be the focus of school administrators and their inclusion of teacher input in assessment decision making; politicians and educational policy makers as they consider other states’ ideological shifts on school assessment practice; and educators of teachers who need to update college coursework and professional development courses.

Through the literature review, the researcher initially proposed influences that affect teachers’ assessment practices. These participants’ experiences showed this can be varied and individual. Possibly, because of the nature of elementary school classrooms, the participants showed their autonomy of purpose and tone in their own classroom culture. This study strove to
understand assessment practices and the reasoning behind the participants’ decisions and path to a practice. Along the way the study also highlighted and illustrated five teachers’ effective assessment practices. These participants provided knowledge and passion worthy of models for future practices.
Appendix A – Interview Protocol

Hello and Welcome.

This is the Consent Letter with all the pertinent email addresses and phone numbers for this study. Do you have any questions about the Consent Letter? [Answer questions, participant signs letter, collect signed letter, and thank participant.]

[Give background information for this research project.]

Do you mind if I record our discussion? [If yes, turn on recorder. If no, take only notes.]

Thank you very much for participating in this interview today and giving your permission to record the interview. My research study asks what are teachers’ views, experiences, and uses of assessments within the classroom. Your input is greatly needed and appreciated!

[Take notes throughout interview and highlight responses that are ideal for follow-up questions.]

**Introduction**

To begin, please introduce yourself by your first name and the elementary grades you have taught.

How many years have you been teaching?

[Use a flexible order and pacing to keep the conversation flowing and expand responses. Follow tangents as they evolve and then as seems natural and unobtrusive, bring interview back to protocol.]

What have you enjoyed the most about teaching? [Take note of moments.]

Can you tell me more about _____?

When thinking about your classroom, what would an ideal day for you and your students be like?

**Interview**

1. How would you describe a student’s moment of learning?
   Can you describe what leads to these moments in your classroom?

   What types of evidence do you look for in these moments of learning?
   Can you explain further?
2. Can you explain how you plan for these moments of learning? What do you look for when deciding which assessments to use?

3. What are your favorite types of assessments? Can you describe further why you prefer to use these particular assessments? What makes them effective for your students?

[If the interviewee brings examples of assessment tools, take photographs of the items and ask the interviewee to explain each artifact.]

Can you describe which assessments you usually do not like to use? What led you to feel this way?

How do you think students feel about most of the assessments used in classrooms today? What seems to be their favorite ways to show what they’ve learned?

Do you feel you are using more standard types of assessments, more than other types of assessments, around the time when mandated standardized tests are being administered?

4. How would you describe your training for assessing students? Was this a course or workshop?

[Have a card with the following educational situations to help prompt contexts:]

- Preservice/Undergraduate Courses
- Preservice/Graduate Courses
- Graduate Courses
- Professional Development – School Workshops or Conferences
- Working with Colleagues
- Independent Reading

Can you share how they described assessments and learning? Were these discussions helpful? How so?

5. How would you describe your school’s philosophy for assessments? What are some examples of this view?

6. Do you see a need for more teacher education on assessments? In your view, what is the best way to provide this training?

7. Before we end our interview, can you describe which elements of assessment have interested you the most?
8. Would you like to share any memories of your own school experiences and grading experiences that have influenced how you assess your students?

9. Do you have any further comments on assessments to share or questions for me about this interview?

Please feel free to email me in the next few weeks with questions or additional comments. Thank you very much for your time. This has been extremely helpful and informative!
**Appendix E: Coding Matrix Table Template**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive Codes</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>L</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>POA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EOA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AC/TI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AC/D</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTP/TV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TE/TV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TM/TV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SV/SL</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>In Vivio Codes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Relationships</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Students</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Moment of Learning</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Socioemotional</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Assessment Sources</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Data</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Future direction of assessments</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Final thoughts</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Decision Making</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Descriptive Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>POA</td>
<td>Purpose of Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EOA</td>
<td>Examples of Assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV</td>
<td>Teacher Views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC</td>
<td>Classroom Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AC</td>
<td>School Assessment Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TI</td>
<td>Teacher Input</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Use of Data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTP</td>
<td>Research Theory to Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TE</td>
<td>Teacher’s Education on Assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TM</td>
<td>Teacher’s Personal Memories of Assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SV</td>
<td>Students’ View of Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SL</td>
<td>Student Learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


will it take? *Theory into Practice, 42*(1), 75-83.


Irving, S. E., Harris, L. R., & Peterson, E. R. (2011). ‘One assessment doesn’t serve all the


Stiggins, R., & DuFour, R. (2009). Maximizing the power of formative assessments: When teachers work together to create assessments for all students in the same course or grade, the results can be astounding. *Phi Delta Kappan, 90*(9), 640-644.


