THIRD GRADE TEACHERS’ EXPERIENCES IN PREPARING FOR
AND INTERACTING WITH THE OHIO ACHIEVEMENT ASSESSMENT:
A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF THE
2001 NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT

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This research explored the experiences of 4 third grade teachers since the 2003 inception of the Third Grade Ohio Achievement Test (OAT) and the 2009 establishment of the Third Grade Ohio Achievement Assessment (OAA) due to the mandates of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in public school settings in Northeastern Ohio. Also, this study sought to understand the third grade teachers’ perceptions of their students’ experiences with the OAT (OAA), and the influence of the OAT (OAA) on their curriculum and pedagogy. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, data were collected through 3 hour-long interviews with each of the 4 participants for a total of 12 hours of interview data and through 24 hours of observations of the teachers instructing and interacting with their students in their classrooms. Artifacts and fieldnotes added to understanding the phenomena.

The essential themes discovered were that the home environments of students influence classroom learning and produce a perceived achievement gap between environmentally disadvantaged students and their affluent counterparts. In addition, the teachers professed that their effective teaching practices and curricula have been altered by test preparation; thus, according to the participants, the test preparation reduced
enriching learning experiences for students and created a stifling teaching environment. Additionally, the teachers and their students experienced adverse emotions prior to and during the OAA testing. The participants maintain that the OAA is poorly designed and developmentally inappropriate for third grade students. Furthermore, the teachers concluded that their high-stakes testing experiences negatively impacted their professional morale.

**Key words:** No Child Left Behind Law (NCLB), state-mandated testing, effects of high-stakes testing, Ohio Achievement Assessment, effects of high-stakes testing on teacher morale, achievement gap
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CHAPTER I
DEFINING THE STUDY

The reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) with the new mandates of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was signed into law in January 2002 (U.S. Department of Education, 2008, 2009). This well-intended act brought the dawn of a new high-stakes-testing milieu to public schools throughout the United States (Roellke & Rice, 2009). Insisting that the employment of NCLB’s Standards-Based Accountability (SBA) has definite effects on U.S. public schools, Hamilton et al. (2007) explained:

Advocates of SBA often claim that these policies will encourage educators to focus their efforts on improving achievement in core subjects and boost student proficiency, whereas detractors worry that attaching higher stakes to test results will lead to adverse consequences, such as narrowing of the curriculum or excessive test preparation resulting in invalid test scores. (p. 1)

Supporting the concepts of NCLB, Abernathy (2007) stated, “If properly implemented and sufficiently funded, NCLB holds the promise of being one of the great liberal reforms in the history of U. S. education” (p. 2). Whereas Gibboney (2009) concluded:

Rather than support policies designed to reduce poverty and toxic effects on the ability of children to succeed in school, our lawmakers are pursuing the misbegotten path of penalizing schools in poverty-stricken cities and rural areas for their failure to work educational miracles. In so doing, they are eroding the promise of our democracy. (p. 214)
For Ohio public schools before June 2009, the SBA third grade measure was the Third Grade Ohio Reading and Math Achievement Test (Ohio Department of Education, 2009c). In June 2009, the Ohio Achievement Test (OAT) was renamed Ohio Achievement Assessment (OAA) through the passage of House Bill One in the Ohio State legislature. By examining the website of the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), one notices that these two names, Ohio Achievement Test (OAT) and Ohio Achievement Assessment (OAA), are displayed interchangeably on the ODE website (Ohio Department of Education, 2009b). According to ODE’s educational consultant, Andrew Hinkle, the name was changed from “Test” to “Assessment” because Ohio’s Governor Ted Strickland and his educational advisors believed that the word “assessment” had less negative connotations than the word “test” (A. Hinkle, personal communication, March 19, 2010). Furthermore, ODE Consultant Hinkle stated that only the name of the test has changed, and that nothing else about the test has been altered (A. Hinkle, personal communication, March 19, 2010).

NCLB requires that every third grader in all public schools be tested annually in reading and math. The Third Grade Ohio Reading Achievement Test (ORAT) was established in 2003 as a direct response to the mandates of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (Ohio Department of Education, 2009c). Beginning in 2004 the Ohio Department of Education instituted the Third Grade Ohio Math Achievement Test (OMAT) to meet NCLB’s directives (Ohio Department of Education, 2009c). Former Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, who had much input into many aspects of the
NCLB Law, remarked on the decision to implement standardized tests for accountability by stating, “What gets measured gets done” (Guilfoyle, 2006).

Even though U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan had some concerns about the effects of NCLB on students and teachers, philosophically, Secretary Duncan agreed with NCLB (Watson, 2009). He stated that although he realizes that there are significant implementation challenges, he believed that NCLB raises the bar for education (Watson, 2009). Secretary Duncan conceded that under the previous administration’s NCLB policies, many schools were labeled “failing” that were actually improving each year (Richardson, 2009). Concerning the labeling of schools, Duncan explained: “That was wrong. That’s tremendously demoralizing to staff and confusing to parents. That needs to be corrected” (Richardson, 2009, p. 26).

Once an advocate of high-stakes testing and NCLB, Ravitch (2010) has made a 180-degree reversal regarding her support for accountability through state-mandated testing and NCLB. Explaining that the recent educational reform policies “are corrupting educational values” (p. 14), Ravitch believed that to improve education in the United States today, educators must work together “to improve curriculum and instruction and to improve the conditions in which teachers work and children learn, rather than endlessly squabbling over how school systems should be organized, managed, and controlled” (p. 225).

This hermeneutic phenomenological research explored the experiences of four third grade teachers since the inception of NCLB and the establishment of the Ohio Achievement Test (OAT) in public school settings in Northeastern Ohio. The study
sought to understand the wisdom of third grade teachers, the essence of their experiences, and their perceptions of how the OAT (OAA) affected their students, their pedagogies, their teaching practices, their learning environment, and the third grade curriculum. This research examined how the four teachers aligned classroom instruction when preparing for the OAT (OAA), and the ways teachers gave emotional support to their students when preparing for and during the OAT (OAA). This study endeavored to answer the question: What are the experiences of four third grade teachers due to the mandates of NCLB and the OAT (OAA)?

**Statement of the Problem**

Much valuable learning time and money are invested into high-stakes, standardized tests (Cuban, 2004; Popham, 1999). Often, students acquire negative emotions and some become disturbed emotionally when having to interact with high-stakes, standardized tests (Noddings, 2004). Various educators have offered their insights and beliefs regarding standardized testing in the early childhood grades of kindergarten through third grade. Jacobson (2000) reminded us that young children in kindergarten through third grade are poor pencil-and-paper test takers and should not be exposed to such damaging assessment practices. Often, standardized tests administered to kindergarten through third grade students are typically untrustworthy because young students are capricious (Fleege, 1997; Perrone, 1992). During kindergarten through third grade years, children develop quickly. Consequently, a skill young children do not have on one day may emerge the next (Gullo, 2006; Popham, 2000).
Since its inception in 2003, very little research has been done concerning the OAT (Miller, 2007). I have found a lack of research that seeks to understand teachers’ experiences with the OAT (OAA). There is a definite absence of research studies concerning students’ experiences with the OAT (OAA). These deficiencies are important issues. How can we understand the benefits and detriments of NCLB and the OAT (OAA) without thorough and competent research?

It is important to understand the experiences of early childhood teachers to generate knowledge and make informed educational decisions. Through using a phenomenological lens, this study strove to reveal third grade teachers’ essence of experiences, and the teachers’ perceptions of their students’ experiences as observed through the eyes of their teachers, who know their students and their everyday characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes. Understanding the experiences of third grade students will help to better serve their needs. In their explanation of phenomenological research, Barritt, Bleeker, Beekman and Mulderij (2001) have declared: “We believe that research which describes human experience in order better to appreciate it carries with it the potential for change, the chance that better decisions will be made in the future” (p. 225).

**Definition of Terms**

*Achievement gap:* The observed disparity on educational measures between the performance of groups of students defined by socioeconomic status, home environment, race, ethnicity, culture, ability, or gender, which often is used to illustrate social injustice and discrimination against groups.
Environmentally affluent student: A student who comes from a caring home environment with sufficient emotional, social, and personal development that includes a responsible adult role model and nurturing home/community learning experiences which shape the student’s ability to successfully learn in the classroom.

Environmentally disabled student: A student who comes from a disadvantaged home environment, which severely affects that student’s learning in the classroom due to the student’s inability to concentrate because of the emotional attachment to negative home/community situations.

Environmentally disadvantaged student: A student who comes from a home environment with little nurturing, or lacking a responsible adult role model, or few home/community learning experiences, which shape the student’s ability to successfully learn in the classroom.

Epoché (bracketing): Before and during research, removing one’s beliefs, theories, and assumptions regarding the phenomena, and revisiting the phenomena with a naïve, fresh, wide-open awareness.

High-stakes test: A test that is used as the sole determining factor for making major educational decisions and assumptions; to place students in particular programs or educational tracks, to evaluate teachers, or to measure school progress, district funding, and/or accreditation.

Horizontalization: Regarding all data as being of equal importance at the beginning stage of analysis.
**Imaginative variation:** Scrutinizing all data from contradictory perceptions and diverging orientations.

**Lifeworld:** Lived experiences.

**Phenomenological reduction:** Persistently revisiting the data for a complete understanding, while bracketing one’s own beliefs, biases, and theories.

**Studenting:** Students’ classroom interactions and behaviors (Gershon, 2007, p. 2).

**Research Goal and Questions**

The scarcity of educational research investigating third grade teachers’ experiences with the OAT (OAA) highlighted this study’s purpose to deeply understand four third grade teachers’ experiences with the OAT (OAA). Also, there is a paucity of previous educational studies to understand the teachers’ perceptions of their students’ experiences with the OAT (OAA). Various educators believe that we should investigate what is happening in our schools, to our children, and their teachers due to the passage of NCLB (Dillon, 2005; Hinchman, 2005; Sloan, 2007). Numerous educators have asked for more qualitative research studies that can uncover the truths about the effects of high-stakes-testing practices on young children, their teachers, and the learning environment (Valenzuela, Prieto, & Hamilton, 2007). This study was designed with those objectives in mind.

To form a more comprehensive understanding of four third grade teachers’ experiences with the OAT (OAA), the research goal that directed this exploration was: To understand the essence of the experience of four third grade teachers and their
interpretations of their students’ experiences in preparing for and interacting with the Third Grade Ohio Achievement Test (Third Grade Ohio Achievement Assessment).

The guiding question of this research study was: What are the experiences of four third grade teachers regarding the Ohio Achievement Test (Ohio Achievement Assessment)? Other leading questions that directed this study were:

• What are the third grade teachers’ perceptions of their students’ experiences with the OAT (OAA)?
• How do third grade teachers describe the influence of the OAT (OAA) on their third grade curriculum?
• To what extent do the third grade teachers report that the OAT (OAA) has influenced their pedagogy?

A phenomenological methodology as developed by Husserl (1960, 1964) and advanced by van Manen (1990) was employed to help guide the teachers to answer these questions. Chapter 3 of this study was designed to detail the phenomenological approach utilized in this research.

**Significance of the Study: Call for More Research**

Various educators have called for more research to determine the effects of high-stakes testing and NCLB on students, teachers, teachers’ pedagogy, teaching practices, and curricula (Dworkin, 2005; Ellmore, 2002; Greifner, 2007; Johnson, 2008; Karen, 2005, 2008; Linn, 2003; Meier, 2002, 2004; O’Day, 2008; Parmingian, 2006; Perlstein, 2007).
At a recent meeting of the California Association for the Education of Young Children that convened in Sacramento, Valenzuela et al. (2007) reported that several educational researchers questioned the lack of critical research focused on the value of the federally mandated NCLB law (p. 1). Remaining puzzled by the absence of qualitative research concerning NCLB, Valenzuela et al. exclaimed that there should be more qualitative research investigating the effects of NCLB on students, teachers, curricula, schools, and districts. Valenzuela et al. stated: “In the wake of greater federal accountability through NCLB, policymakers are searching for information about student performance, best practices, and practical interventions” (p. 2). They further explained: “We remain perplexed, however, about what appears at present to be only a handful of qualitative studies examining the effects of federal policy on classrooms, schools, or districts that serve linguistically, ethnically, economically, and culturally diverse youth” (p. 7).

Seeking to answer questions regarding the impact of NCLB on students, teachers, and teachers’ effective practices, Hinchman (2005) reported that many of her colleagues at Syracuse want more NCLB research of varied methodologies. She explained that policymakers need to construct educational policies that permit considerations to situated representations such as epistemological pluralism, which can include various and competing theories of social structures of students’ literacy-related perspectives. Recognizing such strengths and flaws in our knowledge, and then finding commonalities across results, should be vital to the continuing process of creating a reasonable education policy (Hinchman, 2005).
Advocating that there should be more high-quality, qualitative research conducted to study the effects of NCLB on students and individual teachers, Dillon (2005) called for more research on the consequences of NCLB. Advising educators to identify the fundamental principles and criteria for learning improvement, Dillon encouraged educators to work more diligently toward educational advancement instead of allowing policymakers and others outside of the education field to do so. After reading Dillon’s suggestions regarding the need for qualitative researchers to understand what is occurring in classrooms as a result of NCLB, I decided that it is imperative to learn the essence of the experiences of teachers who negotiate the current high-stakes-testing environment of the OAT (OAA) and NCLB. It is important to understand third grade teachers’ experiences with the OAT (OAA) and their perceptions of their students’ experiences for a better understanding of the current, educational environment so we can successfully support those teachers, students, and the educational system.

Reviewing the literature of how high-stakes accountability affects teachers, students, pedagogy, the curricula, educational equity, and communities, Sloan (2007) described that high-stakes accountability was implemented to motivate teachers to create more improved, concentrated instruction and to reconstruct the instructional environment. Citing several research studies that have varying results, she appealed to researchers to produce more qualitative research, which will clarify the complexities of improving public education while struggling with the mandates of NCLB. Sloan asserted:

Although it is true that there has been a proliferation of discourse within both the popular media and the educational literature concerning the promises and pitfalls
of state- and national-level accountability policies, little of this discourse is based on data generated in the very places where such policies ultimately play themselves out: classrooms. (pp. 37-38)

Like Sloan (2007) who examined the effects of NCLB, this study was designed to examine the effects of the OAT (OAA) through the eyes of the experts who deal with the OAT (OAA) and its preparation: the classroom teachers.

Although I discovered several research studies regarding the effects of high-stakes testing and NCLB, I have found less research that examined the effects of the Third Grade Ohio Achievement Test or the Third Grade Ohio Achievement Assessment on third grade students, teachers, and/or the third grade curriculum. The results of my complete research investigations are presented in Chapter 2.

Employing a qualitative case study to understand seven fourth and fifth grade teachers’ viewpoints, practices, and perceptions concerning the impact and value of internal, formative assessments, Brackenhoff (2008) utilized survey research to understand the teachers’ beliefs regarding the impact of NCLB’s high-stakes testing, the pressures of administering weekly-imposed, formative assessments, and how they affected the learning environment. The results of this research showed that the teachers believed that too much emphasis is placed on testing, the ORAT is not a true measure of their students’ reading abilities, the weekly testing impacted teachers negatively, and that the teachers’ beliefs would affect their students’ success on the high-stake ORAT. Brackenhoff called for more research to be done to examine the roles of the OAT.
assessment practices, testing development, and teachers’ beliefs concerning the OAT testing policies.

Investigating what resources and classroom assessment practices eighth grade, math teachers employed to prepare their students for the Eighth Grade Ohio Math Achievement Test (OMAT), Boyd (2008) conducted a mixed-method research study that included the coding of test questions on nine eighth grade teachers’ classroom math tests from 2003 through 2006, and utilized qualitative interviews with the nine eighth grade math teachers. The findings from this study showed that the math teachers narrowed their focus of math instruction to recalling facts and performing routine procedures while preparing eighth grade students for the OMAT from 2003 to 2006. Advising administrators to not pressure teachers to concentrate on lower depths of math knowledge while preparing their students for the OMAT, Boyd recommended that administrators encourage teachers to expand, not narrow, their math assessment practices, although he pointed out that this concept is at odds with mainstream views on raising students’ math achievement. Boyd recommended that there be more research to discover the effects of the OMAT on classroom practices.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study had several limitations. First, this research was limited by the truthfulness, openness, and detail of responses from the participants. The second limitation was “the privileging of language” (Dees, 2000, p. 38). Explaining the capricious trustworthiness of human discourse, Dees suggested that the researcher be aware of language problems that may lead to only the contemporary “accepted”
philosophical perceptions regarding the state-mandated-testing experiences. In addition, the readers’ interpretations of text may lead to restricted or incomplete understandings of the meanings uncovered in this study (Dees, 2000). Also, my own positioning and inadequacies limited this research study in that it was difficult to replicate the teachers’ sentiments, inferences, speculations, and concerns in a way to “feel” their emotional responses, which moved me and touched my heart.

Due to the phenomenological nature of this study, I purposefully included many lengthy quotes of the teachers to demonstrate the numerous complex issues that the teachers considered and deliberated. These elaborate, extensive stories were challenging to categorize into the essential themes and were a persistent reminder of the responsibility to correctly represent the teachers’ authentic experiences. Additionally, the number of educators involved limited this research. Similar to other qualitative research studies, the goal of this research was not generalizability of the discoveries. Thus, the results may not be generalized to other teachers who implement state-mandated testing. Finally, the most substantial limitation of this study remained in the fact that this process stopped short of producing any alleviation or positive transforming action to better the experiences of the four teachers and their students. I am motivated to continue the mission to produce positive political reform for third grade teachers and their students. They certainly deserve a better learning and teaching environment in which to thrive.

Summary: Advantages of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of four third grade teachers and their perceptions of their students’ experiences due to the mandates of
NCLB and the OAT (OAA). Furthermore, this research examined how the third grade teachers described the influence of the OAT (OAA) on their curriculum and their pedagogy. Many educators have requested that more research be done to critically examine the consequences of NCLB’s testing policy. A basic understanding of the teachers’ experiences of preparing for and administrating the OAT (OAA), and their perceptions of their students’ behaviors during test preparation and the high-stakes testing could bring more knowledge of how the OAA and NCLB are affecting those involved. By understanding the experiences of teachers and how they prepare their students academically and emotionally for the OAA, competent educational decisions can be made.

This research may contribute to furthering the knowledge of ways teachers scaffold students’ learning needs to successfully negotiate state-mandated testing, and how teachers emotionally support their students. The findings from this study could have implications for the development of meaningful classroom instruction, improvement of educational/professional development programs and teacher preparation instruction, as well as presenting a basis for future and practicing teachers with insight of how teachers support their students during state-mandated-testing preparation and implementation. My aspiration for this research was to provide a better understanding of how the learning environments for third grade students and teachers can possibly be improved.

The following chapter examines the relevant literature pertaining to this study. Chapter 3 reviews the methodology that guided this research. The findings of this study are presented in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 provides the reader with a summary of the research
findings with discussions and offers educational implications of the study. Additionally, Chapter 5 contributes suggestions for future research and a personal commentary for the conclusion of the study.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter was organized around several facets of this study:

1. The research concerning high-stakes testing and NCLB’s effects on students.
2. The research regarding high-stakes testing and NCLB’s effects on teachers, their pedagogy, their effective practices, their curriculum, and the perceived achievement gap, as it affects the learning environment.
3. An overview of pertinent OAT, ORAT, and OMAT research.
4. Early childhood studies relevant to this research.
5. Literature related to the use of differing methodologies for investigation.

As a young, beginning teacher in the 1970s, I learned to always put the students first. Therefore, the first section of this chapter reviews the literature concerning the effects of high-stakes, standardized-testing practices on students. The first part describes some of the benefits that the well-intended NCLB law has on students according to several writers. The second part explains “front-loading children” (Kozol, 2006). The third part examines students’ test anxiety during testing. The fourth part explores the effects of high-stakes testing on students’ self-esteem, learning, and motivation. While the term “teaching” represents teachers’ actions and behaviors, in this section the term studenting is used to denote “students’ classroom interactions and behaviors” (Gershon, 2007, p. 2).

Since the main focus of my research is on the teachers’ experiences with standardized testing, my second section considers: (a) teachers’ threat rigidity responses
due to NCLB, (b) the effects of NCLB on teachers’ effective teaching practices (their pedagogy and assessment of their students), (c) NCLB’s effects on the curricula, and (d) teachers’ experiences with the perceived achievement gap, as affected by NCLB.

In the third section an examination of relevant OAT, ORAT, and OMAT research is provided. The fourth section investigates pertinent early childhood research studies. The final section reviews literature related to the use of differing methodologies considered for this study.

**Standardized Testing and NCLB Effects on Students**

**Benefits for Students**

Believing that additional attention is being given to disadvantaged students’ achievement by educators due to the passage of NCLB, Kimmelman (2006) stated,

Most educators are still supportive of NCLB but want it changed to be more realistic with respect to the expectations on student achievement. That will eventually happen. They will not get every change they want, but more thought will be devoted to why some of the subgroups actually will not achieve 100% proficiency. (p. 127)

Reminding the reader that NCLB was written in good faith to improve learning for all students, Kimmelman (2006) cited educators who say that NCLB has helped the students in their schools by redirecting the focus onto reading and math instruction with their state standards in mind.

Agreeing that NCLB has placed more emphasis on disadvantaged minorities, Hoxby (2005) explained,
The goal of making every child proficient is laudable, as is the commitment to get it done in real time. NCLB is on the mark in creating an annual standard against which schools can measure themselves; we cannot wait until 2014 to check on schools’ performance. NCLB is also correct in insisting that schools make progress with subgroups of students who have lagged behind others in the past. (p. 79)

Trusting that every child can meet their state’s performance level, Hoxby (2005) indicated that the driving force behind teachers and schools to help students is the mandate of the law: AYP, which is the “heart of NCLB” (p. 93).

Maintaining that accountability is what drives teachers to help students to learn, Hanushek (2005) claimed that NCLB has improved student performance by evidence of rising scores on standardized tests in several states. Asserting that NCLB has motivated states, schools, and educators to better assist students in their learning, Evers and Izumi (2005) declared that the mandates of NCLB have pushed states to write rigorous, academic content standards to improve student achievement. Noting the beneficial aid that compels states to have teachers effectively instruct students, Chubb (2005) explained that NCLB requires states to establish benchmarks termed “annual measurable objectives” (AMOs) in reading and math and one other state-chosen indicator that will help students meet the requirements of NCLB. Remarking that NCLB helps students in many ways, Peterson (2005) pointed out that hundreds of children are receiving free tutoring after school because their school has been designated as failing for the past three years.
Front-Loading Children

The latest pedagogic term for initiating standardized-testing practices on preschool through third grade students has been called “front-loading children.” The term “front-loading” is derived from the economic world of capital investment (Kozol, 2006). All educators should take offense to this new term, which dehumanizes our young children and interprets them as “investment capital” (Kozol, 2006). In addition, Kozol enlightened us regarding many detrimental pedagogic decisions being made by teachers, and policy changes put into place by administrators to accommodate more time in academic pursuits instead of traditional preschool through third grade educational practices. Although Kozol coined the term “front-loading children,” Wood (2004) reported on similar educational decisions to provide more time for standardized-testing preparation by taking away proven, educational practices.

Four “front-loading” educational practices are: (a) Ending “naptime” for kindergarteners: In Atlanta, Georgia, officials discontinued naptime in kindergarten so that teachers could have more time to prepare children for standardized tests (Kozol, 2006). Naptime for kindergarteners was also abandoned in Gadsden, Georgia, so that the teachers could get more time for test preparation (Wood, 2004); (b) No recesses: Elementary schools’ recesses have been terminated in the Atlanta (Georgia) School District and in 80% of the Chicago City Schools to provide more time for children to learn skills for standardized testing (Kozol, 2006). Additionally, Galveston, Texas, elementary schools outlawed recesses to make more time for “drill-the-skills” for state-mandated tests (Wood, 2004); (c) No summer vacation time: Many of Chicago’s
schools deny lower-ability students a large portion of their summer vacation by making it mandatory to attend summer school to drill basic skills in preparation for the standardized tests (Kozol, 2006); (d) Elimination of field trips and enrichment programs: In Muscatine, Iowa, all field trips have been abandoned to concentrate on bringing up the test scores of the elementary schools through intense, test preparation (Wood, 2004).

**Students’ Test Anxiety During High-Stakes Testing**

Numerous educators have reported that many early childhood, middle school, and high school students developed test anxiety due to the high-stakes, standardized-testing policies of NCLB (Casbarro, 2004, 2005; Milloy, Winans, Jehlen, Loschert, & O’Neil, 2003; Ricci, 2004).

Using the *Test Anxiety Inventory for Children and Adolescents* (TAICA; Lowe & Lee, 2005), Sena, Lowe, and Lee (2007) sought to determine the degree of test anxiety concerning standardized testing in a sample of 774 public school students who ranged from the ages of 9 years to 19 years old. They found that students’ worrying, especially during complex problem solving, affected their test performance. Sena et al. (2007) described the students’ excessive nervousness, negative thoughts, and irrational worries before and during the standardized testing. Also, they assessed the students’ degree of social humiliation, which determined fears related to the thoughts of failing the test and the negative responses of others to their perceived test failure. Establishing through their research that some students obsessively worry before and during standardized testing, Sena et al. concluded that the students’ worrying reduced their test performance and created patterns of negative feelings.
Studying how students perceived their high-stakes-testing situations, Lowe et al. (2008) examined the TAICA (Lowe & Lee, 2005) scores of 206 children whose ages ranged from 9 years to 19 years and who were in grades 4 through 12. They determined that the students in their study felt threatened due to the testing, and experienced measured degrees of situational anxiety. Lowe et al. (2008) reported that since the passage of NCLB, the number of standardized-testing practices has increased, and because of this fact, more research should be conducted regarding the individual effects of test anxiety on students in relationship to the standardized-testing practices.

Moon, Brighton, and Callahan (2002) examined the individual effects of test anxiety on students in relationship to standardized-testing practices. They detailed through their qualitative interviews with elementary students (kindergarten through eighth grades) that many of the children felt the pressures of anxiety before and during the standardized testing. Some students responded to these pressures by sabotaging the test; they refused to show their work on required math problems. Students also described feelings of overt anxiety, anger, frustration, and resentment, which led to the sabotaging of the tests. Ineffectively, the students received lower test scores instead of a true assessment of their abilities (Moon et al., 2002).

Additional research regarding test anxiety was developed by Barrier-Ferreira (2008). She conveyed a concern that high-stakes, standardized testing and NCLB limited teachers’ opportunities to nurture the personal development of students due to NCLB’s overemphasis on academics, and the enormous amount of teacher-preparation time involved in meeting the mandates of NCLB. Because NCLB was designed to meet only
the academic needs of students, Barrier-Ferreira believed that the schools are not meeting children’s emotional and spiritual needs, and that NCLB treats students as commodities instead of assisting them in their emotional and social development. Barrier-Ferreira’s concern developed from her study of her personal experiences as a middle school teacher of reading and language arts in Connecticut.

Regarding this study, the teachers who participated in this research have witnessed, what they believe to be, test anxiety in some of their students. These observations have motivated each of the teachers to develop strategies to emotionally support their students before and during the high-stakes-testing event.

**Effects of High-Stakes Testing on Students’ Self-Esteem, Learning, and Motivation**

Using continuous comparative, inductive analysis, Easley (2005) conducted a case study of 12 teachers at an urban elementary school located in an eastern U.S. state to determine the effects of NCLB. Data were gathered from the participating teachers through 27 class observations, 63 informal interviews, and 19 formal interviews. The teachers in the study expressed that formal assessments had a direct, negative effect on their students’ self-esteem, learning, and motivation. Because of the pressures on teachers to cover all of the top-down curricular scripts, students had little downtime or enriching activities during the day. Since the school had been labeled “failing” because it did not meet its AYP, and because the results of the standardized tests were headlines in the local newspapers, the test results caused the students to be emotionally upset. Even though the teachers believe that they are doing their best, and the students are performing at their best, “their best is not good enough” (Easley, 2005, p. 169).
To prove that academic self-concept is both a cause and an effect of achievement, Marsh, Trautwein, Ludtke, Koller, and Baumert (2005) conducted longitudinal research involving 5,649 seventh grade students who were tested twice at different intervals during one school year. Math self-concept and math interest were assessed each time and were both positively correlated with standardized-test scores and math report card grades. Their results provided unmistakable evidence that prior, academic achievement, standardized-achievement-test scores, and school math grades contributed to academic self-concept and self-esteem. Marsh et al. recommended that teachers develop effective teaching strategies to improve scholastic self-concept, interest, and academic achievement simultaneously so that students do not develop poor academic self-concepts, which would negatively affect their learning and scholastic achievements.

Concerned about how NCLB affects children, Robles-Pina, Defrance, and Cox (2008) found that one of the aspects of NCLB that is seldom taken into account is the policy’s encouragement of retaining students so that they repeat a grade in school. Comparing retained students to non-retained students, Robles-Pina et al. examined the effects of early school retention, self-concept, and early childhood depression on a purposeful sample of 191 urban, Hispanic students. Retained students compared with non-retained students showed statistically significant disparities in: past feelings of hopelessness, lower self-concept, and depression. The retained students in their study reported feelings of sadness, fear, anxiety, anger, contempt, guilt, and confused thinking. Moreover, they uncovered that urban Hispanic students describe more depressive symptoms in comparison to other ethnic groups. Due to the negative effects and
unintended outcomes of retention on students, Robles-Pina et al. called for the punitive aspects of NCLB to be changed. Furthermore, they appeal to educators to develop more culturally sensitive evaluation procedures and examine the present retention policies in the schools.

In conclusion, this section of the literature review provided a glimpse of what other researchers found while studying the effects of high-stakes, standardized testing on students. It is important to understand the research findings of the effects of standardized testing on studenting and teaching because an examination of how standardized testing has affected students and their learning environment can provide a better understanding of NCLB’s effects on students.

**Standardized Testing and NCLB Effects on Teachers,**

*Their Pedagogy, Practices, and Curricula*

Since the main focus of this research is to understand the experiences of four third grade teachers during preparation for and the administration of the OAT (OAA), it is vital that we examine the literature available concerning how NCLB’s mandates of standardized testing effects teachers, their pedagogy, practices, and curricula.

**Teachers’ Threat Rigidity Responses Due to NCLB**

The pressures of top-down policies on teachers were examined by Olsen and Sexton (2008) in their qualitative study of six high school, English teachers. What they found they labeled as “threat rigidity effects,” introduced by Staw, Sandelands, and Dutton (1981), and described these as the “theory that an organization, when perceiving itself under siege (i.e., threatened or in crisis), responds in identifiable ways: Structures
tighten; centralized control increases; conformity is stressed; accountability and efficiency measures are emphasized; and alternative or innovative thinking is discouraged” (Olsen & Sexton, 2008, p. 15). All of the teachers who participated in the Olsen and Sexton study displayed threat rigidity responses, such as: stress, helplessness, and conformity that decreased the teachers’ perceptions of themselves. Each teacher spoke about the external pressures from the administration, local media, and government that had labeled their school as a failing one.

All of the teachers participating in the Olsen and Sexton study (2008) felt that the administration and the NCLB policy makers did not respect their professional practice. Every one of the teachers expressed that the decreased trust and deprofessionalization made them feel resentful. The way that they coped was to detach themselves emotionally from situations and isolate themselves in their classrooms. Also, the teachers felt demoralized to have to abide by education mandates developed by nonteaching educators, politicians, and people who for decades have not taught (Olsen & Sexton, 2008). Concerning the mandates of NCLB, one teacher in their study expressed:

It takes the pride out of your work—if you’ve developed a unit of something, I think being told, “No, you have to do this instead,” is very demoralizing. It makes me feel like, then, you don’t really need trained teachers; you just need trained monkeys. It’s disrespectful to teachers. (p. 23)

Olsen and Sexton (2008) concluded that the top-down mandates have terminated the teachers’ autonomy, limited their creativity, and restricted their critical thinking.
Finnigan and Gross (2007) researched demands from administrators and other top-down authorities on teachers’ morale and motivation. Utilizing a mixed-method study, they explored if NCLB’s accountability policies influenced teachers’ morale and motivation in 10 of Chicago’s low-performance elementary schools with special emphasis on teachers in third, sixth, and eighth grades. One of the major conclusions of their study was that the motivation of the teachers decreased rather than increased in the schools in which the staff had more difficulties in meeting the accountability expectations. Because of the blaming policies of NCLB, there was a decrease in teacher morale. The longer that their school was on a probationary status, the lower the teachers’ expectations became that they would be able to meet the NCLB goals. Finnigan and Gross believed that the writers of NCLB have made a major mistake to rely on threats to motivate teachers in low-performing schools instead of providing important assistance and support for struggling faculties.

Conducting an ethnographic case study, Pennington (2004) considered how the testing policies of NCLB affected teachers of minority students in a Texan, urban elementary school located in a predominately Latino-Mexican-American region. The eight participants in her study taught second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grades, and the Latina elementary principal, who formerly encouraged the teachers to include culturally responsive, socially-constructed teaching practices. The teachers abandoned their culturally responsive, socially-constructed pedagogy due to the top-down mandates of NCLB’s accountability and replaced their culturally responsive practices with teaching the test materials, test writing, and test reading. The teachers were constantly reminded
not to use culturally responsive pedagogy by the administrators of their district because such pedagogy might lower students’ test scores on the state tests. Pennington reported that although all of the teachers felt that their culturally responsive pedagogy was the most effective practice for the minority students, the teachers were obligated to adhere to district policy. Due to the high-stakes accountability, many teachers experienced increased emotional strain and either left the teaching profession or considered leaving their careers (Pennington, 2004).

Many educators teaching various grades levels have described that they feel helpless because of the top-down mandates of NCLB (Daly, 2009; Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008). Nieto and Johnson (2008) defined the current learning environments produced by NCLB as hostile and mean-spirited because NCLB presumes that teachers cannot be trusted or make correct choices of how best to educate students in their classrooms. Teachers were expected to conform to directives from school officials and abide by their decisions with no questions or input (Bushnell, 2003; Grant, 2009). Because of the “failing” label of some schools given by the government, many teachers were anxious and the morale was low in those schools due to the teachers not knowing if they would have a teaching position the following school year (Spring, 2008).

Some educators teaching a variety of grade levels have left the profession because of the stress and anxiety the teachers experience from the policies of NCLB (Goodman, 2004; Howard, 2006). However, most teachers have surrendered out of fear to the fact that high-stakes, standardized tests are unavoidable and have directed nearly all of their
efforts to preparing their students for the state tests, even though they feel that they are not doing what is best for their students (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008).

**Effective Teaching Practices Affected by NCLB**

Some researchers believe that NCLB is demoralizing teachers by forcing them to replace meaningful learning experiences with test-preparation activities (Earley, 2004). Rich, student-teacher conversations are being exchanged with direct teacher instruction and drills (Harris, Brown, Ford, & Richardson, 2004). Instead of facilitating student skills and learning by building on students’ present knowledge and connecting with their own experiences and cultures, many teachers are changing their teaching practices to allow only time to train students to do well on the state tests (Bracey, 2009). Only knowledge and skills that are measured on the state’s test are important (Eisner, 2001). Often, successful teaching equates to solely students’ scores on the state’s tests (Kohn, 2000a; Kornhaber, 2004).

Top-down, accountability reforms alter teachers’ power to carry out innovative teaching and instructional practices that directly influence learning and the lives of children (Daly, 2009). Standardized approaches to pedagogy and teaching practices are so restricted in some schools that teachers find it difficult to devise personal solutions to dilemmas in their own classrooms (Easley, 2005). Using the results of their research, Brint and Teele (2008) reported that the teachers they interviewed believed that their professionalism was being attacked by state, educational bureaucrats through the mandates of NCLB. Due to the current accountability policies of NCLB and its surveillance of teachers, the NCLB demands have restricted the power of teachers and
have constructed educators as semiprofessionals (Easley, 2005). Teachers whose pedagogy and practices are constantly monitored do not have the benefit of decision-making autonomy, intellectual freedom, and the trust features of professionals (Noddings, 2004).

Investigating teachers under pressure to raise standardized tests scores, Poetter (2006) determined that administrators insisted that teachers allocate an increasing amount of important classroom time exclusively preparing their students for the standardized tests mandated by NCLB. Without questioning or debating the top-down directives from school officials, teachers were expected to acquiesce to standardize testing beliefs and practices (Apple, 2007). Educators are compelled to teach the “right skills,” the “precise information,” in the “correct way,” yet many teachers explained that the standardized scripted practices for the standardized curriculum are not teaching the critical thinking skills that students need (Graham & Neu, 2004).

Although the writers of NCLB inferred that standardized testing would improve teaching, various teachers reported that they were coerced into teaching to the test from the very first day of the school year (Haerr, 2006; Shealey, 2006). Educators teaching diverse grade levels have conveyed that their creativity, instructional skills, and professional experiences are being eroded by NCLB (Noddings, 2007). Different grade-level teachers felt that their effective practices are being pushed aside for continual, monotonous drills, repressive worksheets, and insufficient, critical-thinking development due to standardized test preparation (Kohn, 2000b). Teachers were left to negotiate and construct their strategies to resist the standardization of their pedagogy, practices, and
student assessments (Armor, 2008). Because of the mandates of NCLB, school officials have destroyed many teachers’ creative pedagogy and effective practices by demanding scripted instructional practices, regulated materials, standardized lesson plans, oppressive curriculum, unvarying grading guidelines, and rigid assessments (Larson & Gatto, 2004).

For five years, Crocco and Costigan (2007) conducted 200 qualitative interviews and dozens of focus groups with 219 high school and middle school teachers to determine if they witnessed a diminished teaching autonomy or a lessening of professional or personal identity, or if teachers believed that the high-stakes-testing environment had reduced their rapport with their students. Through the findings of their research, Crocco and Costigan conveyed that many of these teachers complained about “shrinking space for their classroom-based decision making . . . frustrated by their inability to use expertise acquired through their professional preparation” (p. 521). The teachers felt deskilled by the dictated use of scripted lessons and the narrow curriculum demands of the administration.

High school and middle school teachers expressed that they wanted to do more creative, enriching activities with their students, but were afraid of “bucking the system,” and did not want to be perceived as mavericks (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). Some teachers who went beyond the “drill the skills” and provided enriching learning experiences found that they often fell behind their district’s test-preparation timelines (Heck, 2006). When teachers at all levels (K-12) lagged behind their district’s test-preparation schedules, they reported that they usually made up the lost time from other subjects that would not be on
the state standardized test, such as social studies, art, and physical education activities (Darling-Hammond, 2004).

Child-centered versus test-centered classroom cultures and the pressures of high-stakes, standardized testing were analyzed by Valli and Chambliss (2007) in their qualitative research to learn: “the ways in which child-centered and test-centered classroom cultures are constructed and the different types of learning opportunities and relationships each provides” (p. 57). They reported that fourth and fifth grade teachers believed that their teaching was diminished by the pressures of high-stakes, standardized testing as a result of the NCLB mandates on a daily basis. They described how the fourth and fifth grade teachers felt that their curriculum content was negatively affected by preparation for the high-stakes, standardized testing and the demands to meet AYP for NCLB. Their study found that less time was spent on enriching, reading activities and more time was spent on test-preparation activities. They concluded: “To the extent that a child-centered culture is supplanted by a test-centered culture, it is likely that academic achievement, as well as meaningful school experiences and personal bonds among teachers and students, will diminish” (Valli & Chambliss, 2007, p. 73).

Employing qualitative interviews with elementary teachers (kindergarten through eighth grades), Moon et al. (2002) studied how high-stakes testing was affecting teaching practices. Most teachers said that little attention was given to topics that were not on the state tests, especially concerning the fine and performing arts. During the interviews, several teachers reported a reduced use of educational approaches and instructional strategies that were student-centered, creative in nature, and time-intensive. Teachers did
not have enough time to respond to the diversity of learners in their classrooms, thus most teachers employed a one-size-fits-all instruction practice. Also, numerous teachers indicated that students’ assessments were usually in the state-test’s format, and that they rarely used long-term projects, authentic or performance assessments because of time restrictions. Often, the teachers felt pressure from the administration to improve the students’ scores on the state tests (Moon et al., 2002).

Because of NCLB’s reliance on standardized-test results, Kozol (2006) reported that many school officials worry that the results of the standardized tests may replace and supersede the judgments of classroom teachers. He conveyed that many administrators are concerned that because standardized testing seems so scientific and appears to be objective, teachers may distrust their own abilities to observe and assess their young students. Teachers may feel uncomfortable deriving conclusions from their own observations that may dispute the results of the standardized tests. This situation can be seriously detrimental to students and teachers (Kozol, 2006).

**Narrowing the Curriculum: The Effects of NCLB on the Curricula**

To understand if the curriculum was providing critical thinking skills, Castagno (2008) conducted an ethnographic study at a middle school to learn if improvements in test results led to a narrowing of the curriculum. Many of the seventh and eighth grade teachers reported that although the students were scoring higher on the standardized tests because of the “drill the skills” methods utilized, their students would need to learn other important life-skills that were not being taught in the schools. This diminishing of life-skill curriculum was a direct result of the mandates of NCLB and the principal’s goal
to reach the school’s AYP. One of the middle school teachers reported that the principal told her “to not do anything that didn’t directly improve test scores and was not directly related to the [standardized] math tests” (Castagno, 2008, p. 6). Another middle school teacher expressed the belief that the curriculum should do more than just raise test scores. She felt that curriculum should promote learning about the responsibilities of social justice and developing an appreciation for diversity. These were goals that the schools neglected. Other teachers maintained that the standardized curriculum, which centered on just reading and math, did not improve the equity and social justice for the students, their families, or their community (Castagno, 2008).

McNeil and Valenzuela (2001) examined equity and curricula social justice. In Texas, they discovered that minority and poor students in several high schools only learned to compose the form of essay that appears on the standardized, state test. No other composition curriculum was offered at these high schools. Also, the only reading curriculum that was provided for the minority and lower socioeconomic students was short-passage reading with literal interpretation. The high school students did not develop the abilities or motivation to read longer literary pieces. They were not inspired to develop critical thinking skills or encouraged to construct creative, literary works. The curriculum narrowly focused on only those subjects, which were included on the state tests. The curriculum caused the high school students to feel a disengagement of learning, which resulted in a detachment from their teachers and the educational experience (McNeil, 2000a, 2000b; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001).
Curricular decisions have been severely limited due to the mandates of NCLB in many elementary, middle, and high schools (P. B. Baker, 2005; Stock, 2007). Teachers at all levels are requested to only implement approved curricula designed by curriculum creators, which are often termed as “teacher-proof” guides that deskill and deprofessionalize teachers (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008). These limitations on the academic freedoms of educators have an oppressive influence on the curricula (Adarkar & Keiser, 2007). Often, administrators demand that only the subject content that will be included on the high-stakes, standardized tests be offered in the classrooms so that their school can make their AYP (Knaus, 2007).

Administrative mandates often narrow the curriculum and prohibit access to the arts (M. Baker & Foote, 2006). Sadly, the federal-mandated policies of NCLB are narrowing the curriculum by having teachers replace subjects and topics with only those included on the state tests (Clift, 2008). Frequently, teachers at all levels are told that they are not to teach any subject, topic, or alternate issues outside of the district-approved text (Cochran-Smith, 2005). This hegemonic chaos was the case in several Southern states where the science textbooks were adopted by boards of educations because of no evolution topic in the text (Cohen, Raudenbush, & Ball, 2003).

The rejection of “untested” subjects and the “narrowing of curriculum” were scrutinized by Crocco and Costigan (2007). They conducted a narrative qualitative research study comprising of 219 high school and middle school teachers to determine if teachers experienced the “narrowing of curriculum” from the scripted lessons and authorized, restrictive curriculum, which has developed since the mandates of NCLB.
Numerous teachers expressed that their “mandated curriculum not only deprofessionalized their work, but also depersonalized the human connections nurtured by more student-centered curriculum and pedagogy” (p. 521). An overwhelming number of teachers expressed the distressing view that successful teaching is being characterized as “faithful devotion to the prescribed coverage of mandated curriculum or dutiful replication of scripted lessons” (p. 526). Teachers articulated that they felt great pressure from their administrators to follow the narrowed curriculum and rigid, scripted lessons. Crocco and Costigan called for more research to be done in other locales to examine if the standardized testing policies narrow the curriculum and pedagogy in those locations.

The effects of the standardized testing policies that narrow the curriculum and limit pedagogy were considered by Viruru (2006). He viewed high-stakes-testing, standardized curriculum, and NCLB as “the ultimate imposition of rampant scientifism” (p. 49) and “corporate capitalism upon children and schools” (p. 50). He believed that the dominant class elitists want to control and dominate teachers, the curriculum, and what students learn in their classrooms. He described a “modern capitalist colonialism” in which standardized testing practices for young children have been colonizing:

1. The way in which testing has been constructed represents corporate rather than child centered agendas;

2. The ideology of diversity represented in many public policies, particularly standardized testing, instituted in the United States is gravely limited; and
3. By mandating that children take tests but by not regulating the content that is part of those tests, racist and colonialist ideas are being presented to children in legitimate forms. (Viruru, 2006, p. 51)

Darling-Hammond (2007) contemplated NCLB and educational globalization. She reported that most industrialized nations structure their curriculum on problem solving and critical thinking skills as opposed to much of the U.S. curriculum, which requires students to recognize correct information rather than generating it. The majority of high-achieving countries use tests on which students must produce scientific investigations, research to solve multifaceted real-life problems, and support their concepts orally or in a written composition. The NCLB’s standard-based accountability assumes a single, correct response to problems rather than complex problem solving and multiple means of arriving at solutions. Darling-Hammond argued that the current testing and narrowing of the curriculum situation in the United States is comprised of lower order thinking and memorized facts that are not adequate to meet the demands of national or international existence. Darling-Hammond explained:

The administration of NCLB has tended to discourage the use of performance assessments and has reinforced the reliance on multiple-choice tests, as well as their use for many purposes such as grade retention and tracking for which they are not valid. Efforts to create a ‘thinking curriculum’ for all students are important to individual futures and our national welfare. (p. 330)
Concerning the Achievement Gap

Although my research directly explored teachers’ experiences with the OAT (OAA), it indirectly investigated the teachers’ experiences with the results of the NCLB passage. It was important to review the literature on the perceived achievement gap between disadvantaged students and more affluent students because NCLB and the perceived achievement gap are parts of the phenomena that were explored by the researcher and the participants through this phenomenological research. It was vital to study the perceived achievement gap between deprived students and more advantaged students because this phenomenon appeared in the environment in which the third grade teachers worked. All of the third grade teachers in this study addressed their experiences with an achievement gap among their students. Thus, it was important to discuss the achievement gap here and to review the literature available.

Washington, DC’s current superintendent, Michelle Rhea, maintains that NCLB helps improve students’ learning environment and closes the achievement gap (E. Thomas, Conant, & Wingert, 2008). The U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, believes that NCLB focuses on closing the achievement gap (Richardson, 2009). Duncan has stated: “As a country, we used to sweep that conversation under the rug and not talk about the tremendous disparities in outcomes between white children and African-American and Latino children. Forevermore, we will keep that front and center” (Richardson, 2009, p. 25). Secretary Duncan insists that educators need to be held accountable for results whether the achievement gap affects their students or not (Richardson, 2009).
Through their research, Blanchett, Brantlinger, and Shealey (2005) found NCLB to be unfair due to its focus on equal outcomes instead of concentrating on equivalent educational and societal circumstances. They believed that NCLB employs empty talk of equality in name, but in reality continues inequality. Blanchett, Mumford, and Beachum (2005) maintained that although NCLB was written to improve learning opportunities for all children, in practice, NCLB has only subjected children who live in poverty to high-stakes, standardized testing, few educational resources, and insufficient opportunities. They argued that NCLB actually widens the achievement gap between children living in poverty, children with disabilities, and their affluent peers (Blanchett, Mumford, et al., 2005).

Gerstl-Pepin (2006) conducted a narrative, qualitative research study in which she interviewed elementary educators at a disadvantaged school in a high-poverty community. All of its student population were eligible for free or reduced lunches. Also, 50% of the elementary children lived in single-parent households and many had inadequate, early childhood education, inaccessible health care; some were lacking food, clothing, toys, and books. A number of the elementary students were growing up in violent home or community environments. Gerstl-Pepin pointed out that policy makers need to realize that a child’s family situation has much to do with the child’s academic success. She described that “the idea [NCLB] implies that the needs of each child will be addressed; yet at the same time, it assumes that if schools only change their assumptions about students, the achievement gap would cease to exist” (Gerstl-Pepin, 2006, p. 148).
Gerstl-Pepin (2006) argued that policy makers see no other factors, such as poverty, lack of proper healthcare, nutrition, safety, literacy, quality early childhood education, or violence in the home or community, responsible for the achievement gap. She contended that social inequalities decisively remain because policy makers continue to shift the blame for the achievement gap to teachers and schools and away from the economic disparities. Overall, the elementary teachers agreed that if policy makers truly aspired to leaving no child behind, they should address the issues of poverty, toxic living environments, and the lack of early childhood education and quality childcare.

Their sociological and historical investigation of NCLB led Hunter and Bartee (2003) to reason that NCLB methodically widened the achievement gap “between the have and the have nots . . . the NCLB goals clearly suggest that schools will be closed if academic standards are not achieved under the guise of accountability” (p. 159). Hunter and Bartee maintained that the standardized testing of students equates to systemic discrimination and that the scores from standardized tests should not be used as the decisive measuring stick of the students’ achievements. Additionally, Hunter and Bartee questioned: “NCLB inherently assumes a blame the victim approach in its attempt to remedy educational inequities. Who holds the testing industry accountable? Should the test market remain unregulated and unchecked?” (p. 158).

Studying NCLB’s impact on minority groups, Sunderman, Kim, and Orfield (2005) examined the equity issues in education and the use of standardized-test-based accountability. They found that NCLB was not serving the purposes for which the policy makers intended. Some of the problems, which they addressed, were that NCLB
contained impractical standards and inequitable expectations. They charged that NCLB had a severe impact on high-poverty schools and disadvantaged children. Additionally, Sunderman et al. claimed NCLB’s rigidity of its enforcement policies, its extremely narrow school outcomes, and theories of learning have proven to be poor educational practice. Sunderman et al. called for major changes in NCLB.

Major changes in NCLB were recommended by Stiefel, Schwartz, and Chellman (2007), who analyzed New York State Education Department information to find if NCLB has reached its goal of reducing the achievement gap by legislating accountability. They found that the New York State schools were highly segregated with more than 50% too homogeneous to convey standardized-tests scores for any ethnic or racial subgroups. Also, they concluded that the achievement gap is less in integrated schools and greater in the segregated schools of New York State. The authors predicted that the goal of NCLB to close the achievement gap between disadvantaged, low socioeconomic minorities and affluent, advantaged students will not be met by 2014.

For the purpose of investigating how disadvantaged, low socioeconomic conditions affected school rewards, Gayles (2007) organized a significant study of the Florida School Recognition Program (FSRP), which was developed by Florida legislators to reward schools that produced certain standard-based goals that were measured using high-stakes, standardized tests. Gayles’ analysis of school and state records proved that poverty and race negatively impacted the FSRP awards. The results of his study revealed that the number of pupils on free and reduced lunches predicted a decrease in FSRP awards. In schools with high percentages of minority children, disproportionately fewer
awards were given. Thus, Gayles concluded that the high-stakes, standardized testing and the FSRP continued the existing achievement gap and furthered the social stratification in the public schools.

Also, in the state of Florida, Borg, Pulmlee, and Stranahan (2007) studied one school district in Duval County to examine if students coming from low socioeconomic, higher mobility homes were less likely to pass high-stakes, standardized tests compared to their suburban, higher socioeconomic classmates. Borg et al. found that socioeconomics, school characteristics, teacher turnover and degree levels, and the level of mobility of the students predicted the probability of success on standardized tests. Also, they discovered that high-stakes, standardized tests do not serve as a good measurement for school accountability. Often, Borg et al. claimed that the tests simply show the economic differences between the haves and the have-nots. Borg et al. concluded that NCLB’s approach to improving educational opportunities and raising achievement levels for all students through high-stakes, standardized testing is not succeeding.

Escamilla, Chavez, and Vigil (2005) investigated NCLB’s approach to improving educational opportunities and raising achievement levels for Latino and Spanish-speaking students. They set out to challenge the belief that large concentrations of Latinos and Spanish-speaking students equate to underachieving schools. Through their research, they determined that NCLB has intensified the notion of an achievement gap between Latinos (Spanish-speaking students) and their White, middle-class, English-speaking peers. Another outcome of their study was their recommendation that educators and
policy makers need to become critical assessors of high-stakes-testing information rather than just consumers of the testing results (Escamilla et al., 2005).

Also examining the education of Latinos and Spanish-speaking students, Aleman (2005) went further to exclaim that NCLB has placed the future of Latino students in jeopardy due to its inequality, undemocratic aims, and unjust accountability. Emphasizing that NCLB should implement authentic accountability, Aleman asserted that NCLB should include qualitative as well as quantitative means, should assess students equally on academic as well as nonacademic aspects, and should consider out-of-school dynamics, such as nutrition, health care, and housing as predictive indicators.

In addition to African Americans, Latinos, and Spanish-speaking students, Castagno and Brayboy (2008) believed that NCLB has adversely affected two other minority groups: the American Indians and the Alaskan Natives. Castagno and Brayboy reported that their statistics prove that American Indian and Alaskan Native (Indigenous) students have great difficulties with the standardized tests that were initiated after the passage of NCLB. The authors of the study insisted that:

The increased emphasis on standardization and high-stakes accountability under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) seems to have resulted in less, rather than more, culturally responsive educational efforts and more, rather than no, Indigenous children left behind in our school systems. (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008, p. 942)
The researchers asserted that school systems should promote, and teachers should employ more culturally responsive curriculum and teaching practices that help the Indigenous students close the achievement gap (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008).

Through their research, J. Y. Thomas and Brady (2005) reported that many civil rights organizations, school administrators, educational advocacy groups, such as the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, the National Conference of State Legislators, and the National School Boards Association, have called for important changes in NCLB. These changes include: realistic accountability measures for students, more federal funding to help meet the decree, more flexibility in gauging AYP, and revised standards of highly qualified educators. Thomas and Brady were particularly concerned about NCLB’s failure to improve the educational experiences of disadvantaged students, limited-English-proficient students, and students with disabilities.

In conclusion, this section of the literature review offered an overview of what other researchers have discovered while studying the effects of high-stakes, standardized testing and NCLB on teachers, their pedagogy, teaching practices, their curricula, and the perceived achievement gap.

**OAT, ORAT, and OMAT Research**

Before 2003, Ohio mandated that standardized testing begin at the fourth grade level by directing all public school districts to implement the Ohio Fourth Grade Proficiency Tests (Ohio Department of Education, 2009d). Due to the passage of NCLB, Ohio met the federal condition of third grade, standardized testing in 2003 by authorizing
all public schools to employ the Third Grade Ohio Reading Achievement Test (ORAT). In 2004, all Ohio public school districts were to test third grade students with the ORAT and the Third Grade Ohio Math Achievement Test (OMAT; Ohio Department of Education, 2009c). Few research studies have investigated the OAT or OAA, and no studies have examined third grade teachers’ experiences of preparing for and interacting with the OAT (OAA).

Providing the only research study specifically involving third grade students and the OAT, Winne (2007) compared OAT test scores in reading and math between third grade students who were involved in a foreign language program and third grade students who were not involved in a foreign language program. By examining the OAT statistical data, Winne determined her results of third grade student achievement. The outcome of the study proved that foreign language students outperformed the third grade students who were not involved with a foreign language program in 89% of their ORAT scores and in 85% of their OMAT scores over three years.

Conducting a quantitative study, Hoover (2007) examined all grade levels of students’ performances on the OAT as compared to their socioeconomic statuses (SES). This research examined 609 of the 611 public school districts in Ohio. All test data were retrieved directly from the online ODE’s Educational Management Information System (EMIS) and the Ohio Department of Taxation’s website. This study did not include teachers or students. The results of the study showed that OAT performance was greatly more indicative of the students’ SES than their academic learning. Hoover’s conclusions of his study were:
Ohio’s current accountability system perpetuates the political fiction that poor children can’t learn and teachers in schools with poor children can’t teach.

Indeed, the system of reporting school district and building level accountability progress, The Ohio School Report Card, is as misleading to all Ohio stakeholders as it is unfair to Ohio’s children and their educators. (Hoover, 2007, p. 1)

Additionally, Hoover (2007) recommended major revisions of NCLB and the modification of the OAT (OAA).

Another quantitative study is provided by Durant (2007), who examined the achievement gap between Black and White students’ performances on the OAT. Durant explored data from 25 public elementary schools located in a large district in Northwestern Ohio to compare variables such as preschool attendance, lunch program status, and single parenting. Again, this study did not involve teachers or students. This study found that no one variable could be interpreted as being the reason for the achievement gap. Instead, several factors together appeared to affect Black students, such as family structure, poverty, social programs, placement in special education programs, school suspensions, school funding, and rates of recidivism.

A quantitative approach was utilized by Gascon (2006) to report the findings of a Northeastern Ohio urban school district’s theory-driven evaluation of formative and value-added assessments to improve performance on the ORAT. Gascon analyzed the statistical data concerning the outcome of the ORAT in six elementary schools in all grade levels. Although he involved the third grade classes’ data in the six district elementary buildings, he did not involve teachers or students into his study. His results proved that
there was no statistically significant difference between the ORAT achievement performances in the year before and the year of the execution of the value-added assessments.

The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) sponsored three multiple case studies to examine the effective instructional practices of elementary teachers, but these were not specific to third grade. The first two-day, multiple case study was contracted to the Institutional Research Consultants (IRC) to study the successful instructional practices of four public elementary schools identified due to their high-ranking performance in reading and language arts (Ohio Department of Education, 2005a). Although the IRC does not reveal in their report how many researchers were in the schools for those two days, they do disclose that they surveyed, interviewed, and conducted focus group discussions with administrators, teachers, staff, parents, and students. The IRC reports did not divulge how many hours of data were concerned with third grade teachers and/or their students; the information is not available or was never recorded as a breakdown by grade levels (S. Panizo, ODE, personal communication, November 30, 2009). Since the IRC only visited each of the schools for two days and did not reveal the number of hours of data collected during their research (Ohio Department of Education, 2005a), I believe this research is not valid because it avoids providing ample, thorough information.

The second multiple case study was conducted by Strategic Research Group (SRG), which was contracted by the Ohio Department of Education (2005b) to examine three Ohio public elementary schools to study what factors and resources contribute to teacher quality and the role that teachers play in high-performing schools. In the report
listed on the ODE website, the SRG researchers surveyed all teachers in each school, and the schools’ administrators completed surveys with “pertinent statistics.” The SRG researchers conducted personal interviews with teachers and administrators, and conducted two focus groups with students. The SRG stated that their researchers visited the sites and observed six classrooms at each site. However, in the report, the SRG did not provide the number of hours of observations or the grade levels of the classrooms that they observed. Again, ODE’s Schools of Promise Coordinator, Panizo, explained that the SRG did not report how many hours of data were specifically related to third grade teachers and/or their students or the information is not available (S. Panizo, ODE, personal communication, November 30, 2009). In their report the SRG does not provide how many days or hours the researchers visited the schools or how many hours of data they collected (Ohio Department of Education, 2005b). Thus, I have determined that this study is incomplete because of the lack of data provided.

The last relatable multiple case study, which the ODE contracted with the RMC Research Corporation (RMCRC), involved three urban elementary schools based on student performance on the ORAT or OMAT or both (Ohio Department of Education, 2005c). Once more, the study affirmed: “Research done at the elementary schools included all grade levels from third through fifth” (Ohio Department of Education, 2009a). After requesting more information from the ODE, this researcher found that there is no data available from this study as to the number of third grade teachers or third grade students involved (S. Panizo, ODE, personal communication, November 30, 2009). Concerning this research, the ODE acknowledged: “Given the size and descriptive nature
of this study, claiming cause-and-effect relationships is impossible” (Ohio Department of Education, 2005c, p. 19). Therefore, I feel that there is a need for more comprehensive research to understand the effects of the OAT (OAA) on third grade students and teachers.

**Early Childhood Research Studies Relevant to This Study**

The overt feelings of students, as perceived by their teachers, due to the state-testing policies was explained by Landry (2006) in her research study of 63 teachers of kindergarten through fifth grades who completed an investigative survey and four teachers who she extensively interviewed. She found that students in these teachers’ classes were displaying such emotional symptoms as: fear, self-doubt, abandonment, and helplessness during the high-stakes, standardized-testing sessions. The school district in which these teachers taught demanded that the teachers change their classrooms during the test week so that the students could not get answers from any bulletin boards, thus the walls of the environment were bare. In addition, the district instituted the policy that all windows were to be covered with paper so that the students could not look outside and be distracted. Furthermore, the students’ desks were to be set in rows instead of the usual cooperative-groupings. This change in surroundings caused feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and discontent for many of the students, especially in the early childhood classrooms. Concerning these radical classroom transformations, Landry (2006) asked the important question: “Where is the research that verifies a cold, barren classroom as the ideal condition for testing week?” (p. 39).
Former first grade teacher and professor emeritus at Simon Fraser University, Wasserman (2001) described the preparations for the high-stakes, standardized testing of her 26 former, first grade students as being nerve-wracking and exhausting to both students and teacher. She portrayed one of her better readers as reaching a high anxiety level: “his face had turned a deep rose. I touched his shoulder to comfort him, and in response, he laid his pencil down, lowered his head, and wept” (p. 30). For the poorer readers in class, the high-stakes, standardized test was more like a coloring exercise with students not bothering to read the test, but quickly blackening the circles one after the other. Wasserman relayed that the outcomes of the standardized tests were invalid. She concluded that high-stakes, standardized tests have many flaws and inaccuracies, and should not be administered in the primary grades. Wasserman’s experiences with her students influenced my decision to closely examine and understand third grade teachers’ experiences with high-stakes testing.

To understand if young children’s perceived competence and intrinsic motivation correlate to their academic achievement, Bouffard, Marcoux, Vezeau, and Bordileau (2003) conducted a three-year, longitudinal study with a sample of 115 first grade students. Each year in first, second, and third grades, the students were individually interviewed for approximately 15 to 20 minutes twice regarding their reading abilities in one session and their math abilities in another session. The final grades on the students’ report cards were used to measure achievement in both reading and math. Through their findings, Bouffard et al. discovered that first grade students had high self-perceptions of competence and intrinsic motivation, but that their positive self-perceptions and
motivation regarding their reading and math abilities declined through the second and third grade years. A notable finding from this study is that self-perceptions of academic competence and intrinsic motivation are related.

Using a sample of 119 third grade children and 184 seventh grade students, Abela and Taylor (2003) examined whether low performance in school, which they titled as “achievement hassles” (p. 413), had any effect on third and seventh grade students’ moods, dispositions, or self-concepts. Researchers read questionnaires to all students and checked their answers with them to make sure the children understood the questions. Three different questionnaires were given at the beginning of the study; then two other questionnaires were given to the participants six weeks later. Results indicated that achievement hassles did not produce depression in students with high self-esteem. However, high achievement hassles, which produced self-criticism in the students, significantly caused depression in students with low self-esteem at both grade levels. Explaining a major discovery of their study, Abela and Taylor explained, “The finding that self-criticism served as a vulnerability factor to depressive mood reactions in third graders adds to a growing body of literature suggesting that cognitive vulnerability to depression emerges at an earlier age than researchers previously believed” (p. 416).

In conclusion, these early childhood research studies demonstrate why it is important for educators to learn of the effects that the OAA has on third grade students due to the harming of students’ self-esteem, and their emotional and mental well-being.
**Literature Related to the Use of Differing Methodologies for Investigation**

The intention of this study was to understand individual social phenomena, and was not focused on gathering information that is broad in nature from a large sample, such as quantitative researchers aspire to do. Since quantitative research is a deductive inquiry, which deals with determining individual variables, it was inappropriate for this study (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). This study sought a sociological theory of interpretive analysis through an interpretive analytical framework (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998); using the qualitative approach to research was the best methodology for this study.

Qualitative research is made up of various styles. Several approaches to qualitative research were examined to determine the appropriateness of the research practices. Since the goal of this research was to understand the personal experiences and human perceptions of third grade teachers, it was decided that a hermeneutic phenomenological approach would best provide the inquiry means to understand the descriptions of the teachers’ lifeworlds, their experiences with the OAT (OAA), and their perceptions of their students’ experiences (Willis, 1991). In the final analysis, the research questions determined the methodology for this study. The next chapter reviews the research questions and provides more details into the methodology and methods that were used in this study.

**Conclusion**

While state researchers and educators are considering how to fix the high-stakes, standardized-testing practices that rule the assessment scene, and political adherents debate whether or not to preserve, modify, or discard NCLB, we should not sit by idly.
We should investigate what is happening in our schools, to our children, and to their teachers. The educational research community should produce rich research studies that can uncover the truths about the effects of high-stakes, standardized-testing practices on young children, their teachers, the curricula, and learning environments. Educationalists can support teachers by contributing resources and strategies to help them negotiate the high-stakes-testing environments of NCLB, so that they may help their students thrive both academically and emotionally.

The element of surprise and my openness to my data became apparent in this phenomenological study. I could not predict the outcome of the expressions and narratives from the teacher participants. Amazed by their lived experiences of preparing for and administering the Third Grade OAT (OAA), I was utterly surprised at some of their stories chronicling their students’ lived experiences. Dastur (2000) expressed this idea: “We should not oppose phenomenology and the thinking of the event. We should connect them; openness to phenomena must be identified with openness to unpredictability. This paradoxical capacity of expecting surprise is always in question in phenomenology” (p. 186).
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The goal of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of third grade teachers in preparing for and administering the OAT (OAA) and their perceptions of their students’ experiences with the OAT (OAA). The third grade classroom teachers are considered the experts in this research. The guiding question of this research study was: What are the experiences of four third grade teachers regarding the Ohio Achievement Assessment? Other leading questions that directed this study were:

• What are the third grade teachers’ perceptions of their students’ experiences with the OAT (OAA)?
• How do third grade teachers describe the influence of the OAT (OAA) on their third grade curriculum?
• To what extent do the third grade teachers report that the OAT (OAA) has influenced their pedagogy?

This chapter provides a description of the hermeneutic phenomenological design of this research study. A qualitative approach was utilized to investigate third grade teachers’ experiences and their perceptions of their students’ experiences.

The research methodology consisted of a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, which was developed by Husserl, and expanded by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, van Manen, and Moustakas to secure an understanding of the sensitivity of human
experience (Schram, 2006). Explaining his methodology, Husserl (1981) insisted that the researcher needs to approach phenomenology by first interpreting her own human experience of the entity. The researcher should not try to explain her lifeworld (lived experiences); she should just examine her lived-experience concerning that which is being studied (Husserl, 1981). The description, which she creates of her lifeworld experience, should be the starting point for her reflection and this reflection should provide the clues for acquainting herself with the phenomenon (Husserl, 1982). This self-reflective process leads to the interpretive writing process in which the researcher uses the terms “I” or “we” to augment the truth of the experience and to illustrate that the researcher acknowledges the commonality of the lifeworld experience (Moustakas, 1994). The understanding gathered from the lifeworld experiences of others helps us to increase our knowledge (van Manen, 1990).

Consequently, Husserl (1982) insisted that phenomenological methodology is concerned with the lifeworlds of those studied. Husserl’s concept of intentionality, or inseparable bond with the lifeworld, was adopted into van Manen’s phenomenology (van Manen, 1990). The everyday life experiences of those being studied and the interpretation of those experiences are the central core of van Manen’s phenomenological methodology. Thus, research, writing, and pedagogy are closely related in phenomenology (van Manen, 1982). Because hermeneutic phenomenology centers on identifying the lived experiences of the subjects being studied, it is an appropriate methodology to accomplish the goals of this project.
For van Manen, the lifeworld is made up of four dimensions of lived life: “lived body (corporality), lived space, lived time (temporality), and lived other (relationality)” (van Manen, 1990, pp. 103-105). The first understanding of a person that we perceive is that of the person’s bodily form (lived body—corporality). This perception provides us much information about the person. The immediate milieu or location of the person’s experience is the lived space. Lived time (temporality) is not real clock time, but the subjective time owned by a person as a way of existing in the world and makes up the horizons of an individual’s temporal landscape (past, present, and future). Lived other (relationality) suggests the lived relationship each person has to another, and how that relationship affects one’s life (van Manen, 1990).

Phenomenologist van Manen believed that, “The challenge for phenomenology is to make available, through reflective use of method and descriptions, ‘opportunities for seeing’ through the surface structure of everyday life the ground structures of common educational phenomena and experiences” (van Manen, 1979, pp. 9-10). Phenomenology can facilitate a deeper understanding of the students and teachers during the educational process. Furthermore, van Manen (1982) explained phenomenology as:

That kind of thinking which guides us back from theoretical abstractions to reality of lived experiences—the lived experience of the child’s world, the lived experience of schools, curricula, etc. Phenomenology asks the simple question, what is it like to have a certain experience? (For example, an educational experience). (p. 297)
Hermeneutic phenomenology was most appropriate for this research context and the participants because the hermeneutic phenomenological methodology assisted the participants in their own understandings and helped to communicate the essences of their experiences (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009).

Ontological questions consign focus on the purpose of one’s research and inquire, “What is the nature of reality?” (Creswell, 2007, p. 17). Ontological inquiry is related to the understanding of what it means to “be” (van Manen, 1990, p. 183). Denzin and Lincoln (2003) described ontology as a focus on: “What kind of being is the human being? What is the nature of reality?” (p. 12). These kinds of questions bring clarity to the objects of the researcher’s study. For this study, the essence of the teachers’ experiences and their perceptions of their students’ experiences were the primary focal points. Through a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry, the researcher should focus on human perceptions to understand “the aesthetic qualities of human experience” (Willis, 1991, p. 173).

**Methods**

The method of this research was the hermeneutic phenomenological approach as developed by Husserl (1960, 1964) and enhanced by van Manen (1990). The aim of this research was to shed light on what has occurred in the high-stakes-testing environments of the third grade classrooms in public school settings using van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenological method of: description, interpretation, self-reflection, and critical analysis (van Manen, 1990). Hermeneutic phenomenological research was utilized in this study to create a thorough and understandable description of individual experience.
concerned with the human condition, which can detail the “presence of meaning in experience” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 45). The details of the teachers’ lived experiences were transmitted into written language since this practice is certainly an interpretive process influenced by the writings of Gadamer (1994).

In using van Manen’s method of hermeneutic phenomenological research, the process of obtaining experiential information and analyzing this information in one and the same course of action was employed. The reflective analyzing process started at the same time as the gathering of the information. During the interviews, which were planned to collect understandings of the teachers’ lifeworlds, the conversational interviews progressed to interpretive interviews, since meanings from the interviewees were immediately interpreted (Schram, 2006). Furthermore, the interviewees were included into the research as collaborative partners who were available to discuss the research transcripts and to verify the concepts in them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005).

According to Heidegger (1996), interpretive writing and the quality of the written language (theorizing) are essential in hermeneutic phenomenological research. Asserting that a frequent rhetorical design of qualitative research writing is the utilization of anecdotes or stories, Bogdan and Biklen (1998) revealed that anecdotes are unique types of stories that are methodological strategies to help the reader easily comprehend a notion that may elude the reader. Furthermore, Creswell (2007) insisted that we can learn much from anecdotes since they tell a story about something particular while addressing the
universal or the general. Elucidating the powerful effect that a story has on its reader, Rosen (1986) explained that anecdotes and stories have the power:

1. To compel: A story recruits our willing attention.
2. To lead us to reflect: A story tends to invite us to a reflective search for significance.
3. To involve us personally: One tends to search actively for the story teller’s meaning via one’s own.
4. To transform: We may be touched, shaken, moved by story; it teaches us.
5. To measure one’s interpretive sense: One’s response to a story is a measure of one’s deepened ability to make interpretive sense. (Rosen, 1986, p. 235)

Noting the significance of storytelling, van Manen (1990) maintained that all hermeneutic phenomenological research should include meaningful stories and clarifying anecdotes.

In addition to the interviews, this study employed a very brief qualitative research questionnaire to integrate the research design, to enhance the quality of the data analysis, and to construct the trustworthiness of the results (Wolff, Knodel, & Sittitrai, 1993). The qualitative questionnaire aspect of this study was survey research that provided preliminary, useful information concerning the participants (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). A copy of the qualitative questionnaire can be found in Appendix A. Also, observational time in the teachers’ classrooms was implemented so that the researcher could either study the teachers interacting with their students or for the researcher to assist the teachers and their students in their learning.
Participants

Using a purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell, 2007), the participants for this study were educators who were currently teaching third grade in public school settings in Northeastern Ohio. The researcher sought participants for this study by emailing the superintendents of school districts, so as to have these foremost gatekeepers grant permission to enter their schools and meet with their teachers. The recruitment email is seen in Appendix B. The researcher emailed 75 superintendents in eight different counties over several weeks at different intervals. Starting with the school districts closest to her residence, and when they did not respond to her inquiries, the researcher emailed districts farther away. Numerous superintendents gave consent to contact their elementary schools’ principals to ask permission to address their third grade teachers for five minutes after a staff meeting, or briefly at a third grade team meeting, or any other time convenient for the third grade teachers. Not as many principals responded to the researcher’s emails.

Utilizing the advice of professors in the College of Education at the researcher’s university, focus groups were formed of interested teachers to collect preliminary information that could help explore the teachers’ experiences and familiarize the researcher with their topics of interest concerning their OAT experiences. Also, the focus group methodology was used as a data-gathering tool (Morgan, 1993) to help select the four phenomenological interviewees. Stressing that focus group interviews provide an opulent source of information, provide insights, and contribute much understanding to the topics of the research, Fuller, Edwards, Vorakitphokatorn, and Sermsri (1993) considered
them valuable research tools. The researcher found that the focus groups provided an enormous amount of information, helped in forming an understanding of the teachers’ feelings, and assisted in knowing the teachers personally. Several of the teacher-members of the focus groups commented that they enjoyed the discussions very much.

To form the focus groups, the researcher chose the first two rural districts, the first two urban districts, and the first two suburban districts whose principals or teachers contacted her by email with affirmative answers and interest in the research. Recommending that the researcher take preliminary efforts to recruit suitable participants by contacting them directly and not relying on impersonal recruitment strategies, Jarrett (1993) advised researchers to meet all possible participants in person. The principals at both of the rural districts and one of the suburban districts emailed the researcher to set up a time to meet with their third grade teachers. The principals at the urban districts and the other suburban district forwarded the researcher’s email to their third grade teachers who emailed the researcher directly to schedule a meeting time. The researcher met with the third grade teachers at their elementary schools and briefly explained the research study. Also, each teacher completed the concise research study questionnaire (Appendix A).

Seven focus groups consisting of a total of 19 third grade teachers of six public school districts located in three Northeastern Ohio counties were delicately formed. Each focus group of third grade teachers met with the researcher twice for one hour each time to decide which four teachers would contribute the most to this study. The four participants ultimately chosen were the teachers with the most experience teaching third
grade and/or who demonstrated a genuine interest in the research and a willingness to contribute their personal time. In designing this research to collect the amount of data, which would contribute to a complete understanding of the four third grade teachers’ experiences, one urban teacher, one suburban teacher, and two rural teachers were chosen from the original 19 members of the focus groups.

Via the purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell, 2007), the participants had previously interacted with the testing environments of the OAT (OAA). Consequently, all participants had experienced the phenomenon, which was studied in this research. In this respect, the participants had already formed an understanding of the research problem and the fundamental phenomenon related to this study. The sampling for this research was criterion based, which provided for quality assurance necessary to obtain the essence of the experiences sought (Creswell, 2007). As a requirement for teaching in the state of Ohio, all teachers participating in this study possessed at least an Ohio teaching license/certification for early childhood or for the elementary education field.

Suggesting that having participants who are about the same socioeconomic class and similar status as the researcher, Bogdan and Biklen (1998) explained that this model complements the creation of meaningful relationship between the participants and the researcher (pp. 84-88). Since the researcher is a retired early childhood/middle childhood educator, their socioeconomic statuses were similar, which helped facilitate rapport between them. The researcher’s familiarity with the participants’ teaching profession and their analogous teaching experiences made it easy to develop and ask important questions.
The four third grade teachers engaged in this study granted permission to participate in one brief, qualitative research questionnaire, two one-hour focus group interviews, three or more one-hour individual interviews, as well as to have the researcher observe them and assist in their classrooms. Using pseudonyms to protect the teachers’ privacies, the urban teacher chose the name, Ms. Savannah George, for her alias. The suburban teacher selected the name, Ms. Chloe Daniels, for her identification. One of the rural participants asked to be called Ms. Kasey Lee, and the younger of the two rural teachers requested to be referred to as Ms. Teresa Kristan.

**Ms. Savannah George.** Being one of four third grade teachers at Karuna Elementary, Ms. Savannah George has taught the third grade for four years. Previously, for eight years she taught kindergarten at Karuna. She always wanted to teach third grade and needed a change from the demands of kindergarten. So, she requested a move to third grade. Besides teaching third grade, Ms. Savannah George holds the paid position of Head Teacher in her school since she has earned two Master’s degrees, one in Curriculum and Instruction and the other in Administration. Also, she fulfills the Assistant Director position for the after-school latchkey program for students, which is located at her elementary school.

Ms. Savannah George and the researcher met in her classroom for the meeting and interviews. Her classroom design was very inviting with multicolored, educational posters on the walls and bulletin boards. She had several computers in an area for students to work independently or with a partner. There were white boards mounted on the walls of her room with colorful writing on them conveying a learning environment.
Notably, there was a classroom library in a corner of her classroom. Viewing her classroom seating arrangement, one could tell that her students did a lot of cooperative learning since there were several tables with chairs around them and no individual student desks. She confirmed that, indeed, she did plan a lot of cooperative learning lessons.

Ms. Savannah George’s classroom appeared to be very comfortable and organized as the best possible teaching and learning environment for her students. The only negative experience in this room was that there was no air conditioning in this elementary building, which became a problem on a couple of the extremely warm days in her classroom. Although she had two electric floor fans in her room, the students seemed uncomfortably hot and sweaty on at least two of the days that the researcher visited due to the high temperatures and humidity.

During our interviews Ms. Savannah George appeared very focused and intelligently articulated her experiences with the OAA. She demonstrated a devotion to her students, a love of teaching, and knowledge of many innovative learning strategies during the researcher’s observational time with her. The considerate, effective ways she interacted with her students were very admirable. Her students reacted positively and responded with thoughtfulness. Her classroom management seemed exceptional, and the ways in which she motivated her students were commendable. The researcher worked individually with all of her students on spelling assignments, and each student conveyed a fondness and respect for Ms. Savannah George. It was clear that she was a highly competent and an extraordinary teacher and person.
Ms. Chloe Daniels. One of four third grade teachers at Metta Elementary, Ms. Chloe Daniels has been teaching third grade at Metta for five years. Previously, she taught third grade for four years at another elementary building in her district. However, that elementary school was one of three that was closed, and she was relocated to Metta. Before she was hired by her present school district, she taught one year of third grade in an urban school setting.

Ms. Chloe Daniels is a unique participant in this research study because she is not only a third grade classroom teacher who is involved with the OAA, but she has a son in third grade who interacted with the OAA for the first time this year. During each interview she appeared relaxed and sincerely conveyed her experiences with the OAA. She showed a professional, caring concern for her students and demonstrated an adept gift for teaching. The gentle, helpful ways she interacted with her students proved her to be an exceptionally skillful educator. Her students displayed positive, happy attitudes and responded to her with respect. Her classroom management proved to be excellent with her students clearly knowing how to follow the rules for acceptable classroom behavior. It was obvious that Ms. Chloe Daniels was extremely knowledgeable, an outstanding teacher, and a warm, thoughtful person.

All of the phenomenological interviews took place in a small room adjacent to two combined classrooms, one of which was Ms. Chloe Daniels’ room. A removable wall that collapsed to make the two classrooms into one large room divided the two third grade classrooms. She explained that the two teachers usually kept the collapsible wall in place except during special presentations and on Fridays. Every Friday they would
combine their classes into one large group to do combined activities with the two classes. It was evident that both teachers used cooperative learning, since there were cooperative learning tables in their classrooms and no individual student desks. Ms. Chloe Daniels’ classroom was very attractive and organized. A large aquarium was arranged in front of her desk. Eye-catching, educational materials and student projects were displayed on the convenient counters, on the walls, and on the bulletin boards.

**Ms. Kasey Lee.** Being one of only two third grade teachers in Sunnyside School District, Ms. Kasey Lee conveyed her life experiences in a sincere, straightforward manner. Ms. Lee has been teaching third grade for eight years at Sunnyside. Before teaching at Sunnyside, she began her teaching career by instructing four-year-old students at a private, urban preschool for two years, then another urban, church-sponsored preschool for four years. She substituted for two years at various schools before she was hired by Sunnyside to teach first grade. She revealed that she was 43 years old when she acquired her first grade classroom at Sunnyside. She offered her present age at 64 years and cautiously divulged that she would be retiring after the next school year. After she taught two years of first grade, her principal moved her to fifth grade even though her certification is in early childhood education, kindergarten through third grade, and intervention. She confided that she was unhappy and terrified to move to fifth grade. However, she found that she loved the curriculum and teaching math in the fifth grade.

Ms. Kasey Lee disclosed that she had many discipline problems with the older, fifth grade students. So after teaching 11 years of fifth grade, she requested to be moved to third grade because she likes teaching the younger students, and she prefers a
self-contained classroom to departmentalization, specialization, and the switching of classes. After teaching a couple of years of self-contained third grade, the previous principal requested that the third grade teachers specialize and departmentalize to bring up the OAT scores, which were low at the time. So, Ms. Kasey Lee reluctantly became the third grade math and science teacher. Although she likes to teach math and science, she commented on several occasions that she misses teaching in a self-contained classroom.

Each of the phenomenological interviews took place in Ms. Kasey Lee’s classroom, which was situated at the very end of the elementary section of the coalescent building. Ms. Kasey Lee’s classroom was well organized for learning. The student desks were arranged in a double-row plan with the students facing the front chalkboard. Ms. Kasey Lee commented that her students enjoyed checking their math problems on the chalkboard. However, she explained that during OAA test preparation time between January and April, she rarely had them at the chalkboard because she felt it was more advantageous to use the overhead projector. She said that she felt bad not having her students enjoy their time at the chalkboard. However, she felt pressured to get all the standards covered for the upcoming test, and she felt that it took too much time when the students were at the chalkboard. There were several computers in the back corner of her classroom for student use. Ms. Kasey Lee reported that her students liked using the Study Island Math Educational Software with the computers and that the software program enriched their mathematics learning.
During her interviews, Ms. Kasey Lee appeared sincere and genuinely communicated her experiences with the OAA. She exhibited a skillful teaching ability and displayed a caring manner toward her students. The kind, effective ways she supported her students’ learning confirmed the fact that she was a highly successful teacher. Her students seemed happy and interested in their learning activities. She motivated her students to do their best work through verbal praise, extra recess time at the end of the day, and tasty snacks or candy. A candy jar was prominently displayed on her desk. Often, she would praise students for good behavior or excellent work and tell them to go to the candy jar to get a treat. The students’ faces shone with pride when they received her spoken praise and glowed when they put their hands in the candy jar to receive their rewards.

To get to know Ms. Lee and her students better and to develop a working relationship with them, the researcher offered to help in her classroom and assisted her students in small groups on two occasions with the Math OAA test preparation. Also, since the students no longer attended art classes at their school, the researcher taught two painting lessons, one presenting primary/secondary colors and the color wheel, and the other using primary colors to paint a spring scene. For the most part, her students were well behaved during the tutoring with the math and throughout the art lessons.

Ms. Teresa Kristan. Being the youngest of all of the participants in this study, Ms. Teresa Kristan has been teaching at Sunnyside Elementary for seven years. During her first year, she was a Title One tutor. Then, she taught first grade for four years. The present year during which she participated in this research was her second year of
teaching third grade. Ms. Teresa Kristan commented that she always wanted to teach third grade. When a third grade teacher retired, and a third grade position became available, she was pregnant with her son. So, she decided to stay in first grade because she knew the curriculum and enjoyed teaching the first graders. But then, her principal asked her if she wanted to teach third grade because she had asked him to teach third grade before she was pregnant. He said he would like her to teach third grade and convinced her to switch to the third grade.

Since Sunnyside’s third grade is departmentalized, Ms. Teresa Kristan teaches language arts and social studies to all of the third grade students. Addressing the question of why she wanted to participate with this research study, Ms. Teresa Kristan stated that she would like to see what other teachers think about the OAA and if they have the same experiences with their students concerning the OAA. Throughout the interviews, Ms. Teresa Kristan appeared very energetic and authentically expressed her feelings and experiences sincerely and with great zeal. She smiled easily and presented a thoughtful, intelligent discourse. Most of our interview meetings took place in Ms. Teresa Kristan’s classroom, which was very pleasantly designed and efficiently organized. Her classroom was situated at the very end of the elementary section of the shared building near the playground and located across from Ms. Kasey Lee’s classroom.

The most prominent feature of her classroom was the numerous books, which were very attractively displayed on shelves and in crates around the room. The abundant amount of books confirmed what Ms. Teresa Kristan imparted during one of the interviews; her main goal of teaching was to encourage her students’ love for reading
books. There were several computers against a wall on which Ms. Teresa Kristan explained that the students used the Renaissance Learning STAR Reading Assessment Software Program, which checks their comprehension of the reading stories. Located between Ms. Teresa Kristan’s desk and the doorway were two large tables used for projects and learning groups.

During the researcher’s observational time, Ms. Teresa Kristan displayed a love and respect for her students. Her enthusiasm was contagious during her interactions with her students, and her students displayed an enjoyment of reading and learning. Her classroom management seemed very effective, and she was gifted in positively motivating her students. After this year’s OAA was completed, the researcher volunteered to read several picture books aloud to her students and two of her students read aloud to the researcher. Then, the two students demonstrated how they took their reading tests on the computers to validate that they comprehended what they had read. To thank Ms. Teresa Kristan for participating in this research, the researcher planned and implemented a safety lesson and assisted with a tie-dye T-shirt, art project for the third grade students.

Settings: Participating School Districts and Schools

The three sites for this research were Karuna Elementary (an urban school), Metta Elementary (a suburban school), and Sunnyside Elementary (a rural school). The names are pseudonyms to protect the identity and privacy of the schools and the districts. Each of the school districts is located in a different county of Northeastern Ohio within a reasonable driving distance from the researcher’s university.
Tables 1 and 2 relate valuable information to form a better understanding of the districts and schools involved with this study.

Table 1  
*Participating Schools’ Data Adapted From the ODE Website and Districts’ Websites, 2010*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name and grade levels in school</th>
<th>Average daily student enrollment</th>
<th>Percentage of economically disadvantaged students</th>
<th>Percentage of students with disabilities</th>
<th>School rating and AYP</th>
<th>State indicators met and value-added measure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Karuna (urban): preschool fourth grade</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>87.2%</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
<td>Effective AYP: met</td>
<td>5 out of 6 + above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metta (suburban): Kindergarten - fifth grade</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>38.4%</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
<td>Effective AYP: not met</td>
<td>8 out of 10 + above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunnyside (rural): Kindergarten - fifth grade</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>54.9%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td>Continuous Improvement AYP: met</td>
<td>5 out of 10 - below</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

Participating School Districts’ Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School district’s name and typology category</th>
<th>Average daily student enrollment</th>
<th>Buildings in district</th>
<th>District rating and AYP</th>
<th>Number of state indicators met out of 30</th>
<th>Performance index (0-120 points) and value-added measure (VAM)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Karuna: urban, low median income, high poverty</td>
<td>4,009</td>
<td>One high school, one middle school, six elementary schools: separate locations</td>
<td>Continuous improvement AYP: not met</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>89.3 VAM: + above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metta: urban/suburban, high median income</td>
<td>4,937</td>
<td>One high school, two middle schools, seven elementary schools: separate locations</td>
<td>Excellent AYP: not met</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>95.8 VAM: + above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunnyside: rural/agricultural, small student population, low to moderate median income, low poverty</td>
<td>705</td>
<td>One high school, one middle school, one elementary school: all attached in same building location</td>
<td>Effective AYP: not met</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>92.8 VAM: met</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Adapted from Ohio Department of Education website, 2010; districts’ websites, 2010.

Karuna Elementary (an urban school). The neighborhood in which Karuna Elementary is located consists of urban, mostly low-income housing mixed with apartments, duplexes, and modest single-family houses. One might sense it as a depressed area because so many properties displayed overgrown vegetation and lacked groomed yards. A lone property near the school displayed a car with no tires that had been placed up on blocks in its front yard. Other properties in the neighborhood had
missing shutters, broken windows with wood replacing the glass, and chipped steps leading up to tattered doors. Some of the dwellings remained in disrepair. Although the neighborhood appeared not well kept, the grounds of Karuna Elementary presented an exterior of care and attention to appealing detail. A very attractive brick and stone-marker sign with the name of the school chiseled into the stone was located at the entrance of the school. Many beautiful, well-kept trees shaded the surrounding area of the school.

Security seems evident at this school. The main entrance is equipped with an intercom and video camera. In order to enter the brown brick building, visitors need to ring a doorbell and state the reason for their visit before the doors are unlocked. Once in the school’s office, visitors need to sign a ledger, and if they will be staying in the school for any length of time, visitors need to wear a sticky-backed nametag to identify themselves.

Karuna Elementary’s principal displayed the most personable, endearing qualities of all of the principals. He greets visitors and immediately tries to make them feel welcomed. While on an extensive tour of the school, he conveyed the school’s history and described his personal relationship with the school, staff, and students. His obvious pride in the teachers, students, and staff was evident. He was especially proud of the Head Start Preschool located in his school and proceeded into the preschool classroom where he chatted personably with staff and lovingly with the students. His sincerity was unmistakable; he seemed to be a competent leader. He spoke highly of his third grade
teachers and complimented them on their commitment, dedication, and extraordinary teaching abilities.

Hanging in the hallway of the third and fourth grade classrooms was a lengthy clipping from a local newspaper dated August 30, 2009, that documented the school’s recent achievements on the OAT. The article depicted smiling students and teachers proudly displaying proof that the school went from a 58.9% passage rate on the Third Grade Reading OAT in 2008 to a 75.8% passage rate on the Third Grade Reading OAT in 2009.

Using a one-floor design, the school has two major hallways with two secondary hallways intersecting with the major hallways. The central office can be found immediately to the left after entering the main entrance of the building. To the right of the entrance is the cafeteria with the gym farther to the left. Constructed in 1957, the well-maintained building appeared to be in outstanding condition. An abundance of students’ class work was displayed on the ceramic-tiled walls throughout the building, although there were no bulletin boards on the walls. Posted on the wall outside the classroom of the participating third grade teacher were neatly typed, biographical reports about famous Black Americans, including Beyonce Knowles, Jay-Z (Shawn Carter), LeBron James, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

**Metta Elementary (a suburban school).** Metta Elementary is located in a suburban area on a tree-lined street surrounded by middle-class houses. The yards were trimmed and in attractive condition. When the researcher arrived at the school for the first time, children were disbursed on the playground, and the back door by the parking
lot was propped open. There appeared to be no security system in place at the back door near the parking lot. The researcher walked unrestrictedly into the building without facing a camera or intercom every time that she visited this school. The lack of security surprised the researcher in this era of heightened, school safety precautions.

Another surprise that emerged was the unwelcoming feeling that the researcher had sitting in the main office due to the principal’s ignoring her within plain view. What a contrast this situation was to the Karuna Elementary principal’s welcoming and tour. The researcher entertained thoughts of introducing herself, but decided that the principal was obviously busy. The researcher did not want to interrupt her, even though the researcher saw no other person in her office, and she clearly was not talking on the phone. At the initial meeting, the secretary was kind and said that the third grade teacher would meet the researcher in the office. The researcher contrasted this experience to the urban and rural schools in which she was given directions and then freely walked to the classrooms of the other three participants.

This suburban school building is a two-story, beige brick building with classrooms on the first and second floors. The researcher was never given a tour of the building; however, she discovered the gym across the hall from the main office with both being in the primary hallway connected at one end with the main entrance and the other end with the back door leading to the playground and parking lot. All third, fourth, and fifth grade classrooms are situated on the second floor. There were students’ colorful artworks displayed throughout the building. Across from the office on the gym’s wall were many group pictures of faculty and staff. The school was built in 1969 and named
for an educator who served the district for 30 years as a teacher, high school principal, supervisor, and superintendent (district’s website, 2010).

The school district is situated in a suburb with a growing population of 49,374 (US Census Bureau, 2000) or over 50,000 residents (suburb website). It is located between two large metropolitan cities with one having a population of 478,403 (US Census Bureau, 2000) and the other having a population of 217,074 (US Census Bureau, 2000). The suburb’s website described the area as, “featuring turn of the century homes and new upscale housing developments.” From appearances, it seems like the suburb is thriving and surviving the present economic slump. Additionally, the suburb’s website stated that through community reinvestment programs the suburb “has realized over $100 million in new investment and has retained and created over 2,100 jobs. We believe that fact speaks volumes for the way we handle the business practices we have put in place over the past several years” (suburb website).

**Sunnyside Elementary (a rural school).** Driving amongst the rolling hills of Appalachian Ohio in which Sunnyside Elementary is located, one cannot deny the beauty of the countryside. Sunnyside Elementary is situated on a tree-shaded street in a village of 1,218 residents (village website, 2010). The village is a part of Appalachia Ohio, which at the beginning of the 21st century ranks as the poorest economic region of Ohio having a per capita income index of 0.87 compared to the national average of 1.00 in 2007 (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2009; Ohio Historical Society, 2010). Sunnyside Elementary’s county has recorded an 11.4% poverty rate in the 2000 US Census as compared to the average state poverty rate of 10.6% (Ohio Department of
Development, 2009b). In 2007 the unemployment rate of the county was 6.2% compared to the average Ohio unemployment rate of 5.4% statewide and 5.5% nationwide (Ohio Department of Development, 2009a).

As the researcher drove into the parking lot of the elementary school, a sign stating “Welcome to Sunnyside High School” greeted her. She thought this signpost was odd until she discovered later that the elementary, middle, and high schools are all incorporated into one connected red-bricked building. The main building was constructed in 1927, with additions to the elementary school in 1970, 1971, 1972, 1976, and 1994 when the present third grade classrooms were added to the end of the building near the playground. Concern for security was evident since the front doors were locked. Thus, one needs to press a doorbell and speak to an intercom and camera to enter the building.

The principal met the researcher in the elementary school’s office, introduced himself, and took her on a tour of the one-floor elementary building. He showed genuine cheerfulness as he greeted students, faculty, and staff while strolling the three hallways. Noting the entrance to the middle/high school portion of the building, he explained that he had been an employee of the district for only four years. Previously, he had been a teacher and basketball coach in one of the wealthiest districts in Northeastern Ohio. So, this administrative position in a less-affluent, higher poverty area was a definite change and challenge for him. The researcher felt an immediate connection to him since he mentioned that he graduated from the same small university where the researcher received her BA degree.
While walking through the hallways, the researcher noticed the absence of bulletin boards. On some of the gray, ceramic-block walls hung students’ papers. Since the initial meeting took place after school hours, the principal led the researcher to the third grade classrooms and introduced both of the district’s third grade teachers: Ms. Kasey Lee and Ms. Teresa Kristan.

**Comparison of schools.** Although this research does not necessitate a comparison of schools, the researcher felt it was important to note some similarities and differences. All teachers involved with this study were willing and eager to participate in this research. They equally displayed a loving, sincere concern for all of their students. The student environment in all of the schools was very positive, warm, and pleasant.

Because of the diverse types of schools, there were some important dissimilarities. Sunnyside Elementary is the only elementary school in the rural school district. It is located in a section of a shared building housing the only two third grade teachers in the district. Whereas, Karuna Elementary is located in an urban city district that has 18 third grade teachers integrated into six elementary buildings, and Metta Elementary is situated in a suburb with 19 third grade teachers in seven elementary schools. Sunnyside Elementary’s Ms. Kasey Lee shared that she liked being the only third grade math teacher in her district because her school’s OAA Math Test results were never compared to any other teacher in her district since there is no other third grade math teacher in her district. She imparted that she humorously tells her students, “I’m the best third grade math teacher in our district!”
Another important difference between the rural and urban/suburban school districts is that the rural district is conducive to continuing collaboration between the two third grade teachers. The urban and suburban settings encourage ongoing collaboration within their own schools; however, collaboration across the district often is not convenient and rarely transpires. Karuna Elementary’s third grade teacher, Ms. Savannah George, conveyed this idea when she spoke about the new language arts series that her district was purchasing for the next school year. She disclosed,

All of our elementary schools have to develop their own language arts curriculum based on the state standards. Often, other schools in our district will be teaching a reading skill or grammar skill at a different time during the year than we are. There is little collaboration between the schools as to which skills we are teaching during any specific time period. Finally, with our new language arts series, all of our schools will be on the same page. [She meant that all of the teachers in the district will be teaching the same skills at about the same time during the school year.]

Lastly, another note-worthy contrast between the rural and urban/suburban schools is the connection with support personnel and severe special education classes. The urban and suburban school districts employ educational specialists, such as school psychologists, curriculum directors, technology coordinators, special education directors, many special education teachers and aides. The rural school district shares these personnel with other school districts through an educational consortium. Also, there are no severe special education units in the rural school district as there are in the urban and
suburban school districts. During an interview with rural teacher, Ms. Teresa Kristan, she exclaimed, “We don’t have any students who have been diagnosed with a behavior disorder in our school. When they are diagnosed with a severe behavior problem or severe learning problem, we ship them off to [the nearest urban school system].”

**Data Collection**

All 19 third grade teachers who agreed to participate in the focus group, pilot study were asked to answer a short questionnaire containing three selected-response items and three open-ended items (extended response questions; Appendix A). The researcher developed the questionnaire by examining the initial information desired to learn about the participants. The information collected from the questionnaires helped to form an understanding of the participants and their teaching experiences, and assisted in the selection of the four interviewees. After the research was completed, all questionnaires were shredded and destroyed for confidentiality purposes.

As advised by Wiersma and Jurs (2009), the selected response items and open-ended questions were dispersed throughout the questionnaire to encourage and maintain the participants’ interests. The selected-response items were numbered three, four, and five. The three open-ended items were numbered one, two, and six. The items were numbered in this way to provide a logical sequence and preserve the teachers’ participation with the questionnaire (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). The questionnaire was straightforward to read easily. Since the completion time of the questionnaire was anticipated to be between four and eight minutes, the teachers were asked to complete the
questionnaire at the end of the first meeting. There were no problems with the teachers completing the questionnaires, and the questionnaires were promptly collected.

All items on the questionnaire directly related to the research study. The language of the questions was clear and unambiguous. Jargon, vague words, and technical terms were avoided when creating the questionnaire. Each item on the questionnaire included only one concept to simplify the answers and obtain clear responses. Leading questions on the questionnaire that could influence the participants’ replies were eliminated. No personal or inapposite information was requested from the participants. A simple questionnaire was composed to assist teachers to respond effortlessly, completely, and comfortably (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). In composing the questionnaire, the researcher adhered to the law of parsimony: “Keep things as simple as possible to obtain the necessary data” (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009, p. 203).

The primary method of data collection in a hermeneutic phenomenological study is the phenomenological interview (Merriam, 2002). The interviews with the four participating teachers lasted one hour, were audio taped, and were conducted at the teachers’ schools. Since the process of interviewing can be exhausting to both interviewee and interviewer and most participants do not want to partake in lengthy periods of dialogue (Rubin & Rubin, 1995), one-hour interviews were proposed. During the phenomenological interviews, the advice of Merriam (2002) was heeded, and the researcher tried to discover the essence of the teachers’ experiences, the unchanging structure, and the accurate meaning of their experiences. The researcher investigated her own experiences with standardized testing, “in part to examine dimensions of the
experience and in part to become aware of their own prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions” (Merriam, 2002, p. 94). The researcher did her best to *bracket*, or set aside her assumptions and prejudices, so they did not influence the interpretations and understandings of the teachers’ own experiences.

At the beginning of the interviews, an unstructured format of interviewing as suggested by Rubin and Rubin (1995) was used to ease participants into feeling comfortable. The subject for dialogue was suggested, but at first, few questions were provided, which allowed the participants to lead the conversation. For example, the researcher casually commented: “Let’s chat about how it feels preparing your students for the Ohio Achievement Assessment.” Then, the researcher encouraged the participants to steer the discussion in any direction or onto any topic they wished. Also, a semi-structured format of interviewing was employed at times to seek more specific information (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). For instance, the researcher asked, “Will you describe to me your first experience with the OAT?”

Utilizing van Manen’s (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological research philosophy, the phenomenological interview proceeded with prepared questions that were designed to inspire the interviewees to give concrete examples of experiences, such as: personal stories, anecdotes, and accounts of true incidents, happenings, and encounters with the subject of investigation. The major question of the study was the focus point from which all other questions advanced. As an example, the teachers were asked about certain situations, particular persons, detailed instances, and specific times of preparing for and administering the OAT (OAA). Exploring the complete experience extensively
and thoroughly helped develop the understanding of the teachers’ lifeworld. Oftentimes, the researcher repeated the teachers’ last thoughts or previous sentences in a questioning manner, thus encouraging the teachers to continue and expand on their experiences. If the teachers began to generalize their experiences, the researcher gently urged the teachers: “Can you give an example? What was it like?” (van Manen, 1990, p. 68).

The interviews were carried out until the data saturation was reached (Krueger & Casey, 2009). I planned three hour-long interviews with the four participants for a total of 12 hours of phenomenological interview data. More time would have been scheduled for continued discussion if the participants and the researcher thought that the amount of time planned was not enough time to give a complete understanding of their experiences. During the interviews more complete biographical sketches of the participating teachers were developed using pseudonyms to preserve anonymity (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Transcripts, which were made from the recorded interviews with the teachers, were used as objects of reflection for successive conversations between the teachers and the researcher (van Manen, 1990). The teachers and the researcher became partners and collaborated on the importance of each of the initial themes. They discussed and decided if each theme was correct and relevant by asking: “Is this what the experience is really like?” (van Manen, 1990, p. 99). This question led us into an interpretive conversation, which helped us to reflect on the central question and the meaning of the experience. Van Manen insisted that the researcher will know when the question has reached its point of saturation and completeness by the number of pauses in conversation, and then the participant’s final silence on the matter. The researcher found this advice to be true.
As the researcher collected the data, she was mindful of the advice from Peshkin (1988) who suggested that researchers:

should systematically seek out their subjectivity, not retrospectively when the data have been collected and the analysis is complete, but while their research is actively in progress. The purpose of doing so is to enable researchers to be aware of how their subjectivity may be shaping their inquiry and its outcomes. (p. 17)

As the collection of data progressed, the researcher constantly checked her biases, subjectivity, and personal partisanship so as not to inject any prejudice comments or questions into the conversation. Also, the researcher tried diligently to be sincerely receptive and not be judgmental about the interviewees’ remarks, observations, or statements. Thus, the researcher nurtured the bracketing process to continuously progress.

The main source of data collection was the phenomenological interviews with the teachers. With the permission of every teacher, each interview was audiotaped. Some time was scheduled between all interviews for the teachers to reflect on their conversations, on the information, and on their feelings, insights, and beliefs that they shared. Additionally, the researcher frequently emailed the participants to confirm the essential themes that developed in their transcripts. Other artifacts were explored that could disclose more information to enhance this study. Textbooks, software programs, and other teaching materials were included in the artifact repertoire. Suggestions from the teachers were sought as to what other articles could impart more of the essence of their OAA experiences.
Suggesting that written responses of the participants will enrich the data collection, Bogdan and Biklen (1998) insisted that participants’ writings will help the qualitative researcher attain a better understanding of how participants make sense of their world, themselves, and others, and how their meanings are shaped. In order to better understand the teachers’ immediate experiences of preparing for and administrating the OAA, the four interviewees were given colorful notebooks. The researcher requested that the teachers write simple notes regarding their experiences of the present standardized-testing events that occurred during this research. These simple notes brought to the individual interviews reminded the teachers of their thoughts and their experiences that they wished to reveal. Only the teachers viewed their own simple notes.

Classroom observations of each participating teacher and her students were conducted at various intervals during the study to develop a personal rapport with the teachers and to form a better understanding of their lifeworlds. The researcher observed or assisted the teachers for six hours in each classroom at intervals that were convenient and beneficial for each teacher for a total of 24 observational hours. Using a semistructured observation protocol, the observations served as a point of reference for the teachers and the researcher during the interviews. The observations enabled the researcher to better contextualize the teachers’ perceptions and the culture of their classrooms. Focusing on key events or incidents, Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) advised,

Field workers may first have to rely on their own experiences and intuitions to select noteworthy incidents out of the flow of ongoing activity. Here, for
example, the fieldworker may look closely at something that surprises or runs counter to her expectations, again paying attention to incidents, feeling tones, impressions, and interactions, both verbal and nonverbal. (p. 27)

Observational data was triangulated with the teachers’ interview data for a clearer understanding of the effects of the OAA testing.

The final data collection method, which was implemented in this study, was the writing of field notes in the researcher’s journal to help her bracket her thoughts. Explaining the bracketing of field notes, Hatch (2002) described the process as, “a specific strategy for separating impressions, feelings, and early interpretations from descriptions during qualitative data collection” (p. 86). After each phenomenological interview and each classroom observation, the researcher wrote her thoughts and impressions in a field notes journal so that she could develop complete understandings as much as possible.

In summary, the four combined sources of data collection that were used for this study are:

- A qualitative research questionnaire (Appendix A) containing three selected-response items and three open-ended items was employed in the exploratory phase of this study. The four teachers’ personal insights were acquired from these questionnaires.

- Three one-hour-long phenomenological interviews engaging each teacher separately with the researcher for a total of 12 hours of recorded data was
utilized. The participants wrote brief, simple notes during the study and contributed as member-checking partners in this research.

- Observations of the four participating teachers interacting with their students in their classrooms provided a better understanding of their lifeworlds. The researcher devoted six hours in the classroom of each teacher for a total of 24 observational hours.

- Field notes were documented in a journal to help the researcher bracket her thoughts, and record impressions of the interviews, the observations, and interviewees for further analysis.

**Data Analysis**

This study was examined by the following four levels of phenomenological analysis:

- **Epoché (bracketing):** Husserl (1990) maintained that the researcher must remove all of her beliefs, theories, and assumptions regarding the phenomena and revisit the phenomena with a naïve, fresh, wide open awareness. Bracketing permits the phenomenological experience to be described and understood by its own essential meaning, not one inflicted on it from outside itself. The method of bracketing used in this study consisted of isolating and suspending all of the researcher’s preconceived beliefs that related to the phenomenon, which was being studied (Hatch, 2002). The researcher used the bracketing method to shelve her biases, preconceptions, and foregone conclusions. Personally, the researcher believes that epoché (bracketing)
requires awareness, honesty, and respectfulness for her participants, in that the researcher should listen to their truths and their lifeworld stories untainted by her own biases and beliefs.

• Phenomenological reduction is the practice of persistently revisiting the “essence of the experience to derive the inner structure or meaning in and of itself” (Merriam, 2002, p. 94). The researcher analyzed the transcripts from the teachers’ conversations to understand the essence of meaning that the teachers offered. Also, the researcher wrote field notes after each interview to record her observations, impressions, and thoughts to develop a more complete understanding.

• Horizontalization is the method of situating all of the data and regarding all details as being of equal importance at the beginning stage of analysis (Merriman, 2002). The researcher considered all information of the same significance at the start of her research so that thematically the emerging themes could appear. The essential themes became the hermeneutic tools from which the researcher began to understand the phenomena and essence of the teachers’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

• Imaginative variation requires scrutinizing all data from contradictory perceptions and diverging orientations (Merriman, 2002). The researcher used critical thinking to investigate the teachers’ perspectives on the meanings of their experiences with the OAA and their interpretations of their students’ encounters with the OAA.
Thematic analysis (the study of themes) is vital in a phenomenological research approach and is the focus, meaning, or the point of the investigation (van Manen, 1990). Although thematic analysis is a simplification of the experience, it is a way to capture the understanding of the phenomenon that one wishes to know. A theme of the research is not an object or generalization, but a concept of the lifeworld experience of the participant. A phenomenological researcher uses themes to make sense of the lived experience of the interviewee. Using themes allows the researcher to be open to disclosures and insights, and to discover the content of a notion (van Manen, 1990).

Providing three methods to interpreting transcripts and text, van Manen (1990) explained first: “the wholistic reading or sententious approach,” which examines the transcript or text as a whole and asks the question: “What sententious phrase may capture the fundamental meaning or main significance of the text as a whole?” (p. 93). Using his second method, the “selective or highlighting approach,” the researcher reads texts or listens to recorded conversation numerous times and asks: “What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described?” (p. 93). Utilizing his final procedure, which he termed the “detailed reading or line-by-line approach,” the researcher is directed to examine every individual sentence or each sentence group and inquire: “What does this sentence or sentence cluster reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described?” (p. 93).

Two types of themes appear in van Manen’s (1990) approach to hermeneutic phenomenological research: essential themes and incidental themes. The researcher should desire to illuminate the essential themes, not the incidental themes. Van Manen
explained that it is often difficult for the researcher to distinguish between these two types of themes. To help understand how to differentiate between essential themes and incidental themes, van Manen advised: “In determining the universal or essential quality of a theme our concern is to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is” (p. 107). Using the method of “free imagination variation” (p. 107) aids the researcher in distinguishing between essential themes and incidental themes. The crucial questions to ask in the process of free imagination variation are: “Is this phenomenon still the same if we imaginatively change or delete this theme from the phenomenon? Does the phenomenon without this theme lose its fundamental meaning?” (p. 107).

As the researcher analyzed the transcripts from the interviews, themes appeared. These themes represented structures of the teachers’ experiences. The essential themes were the “experiential structures that make up that experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 79). The researcher noticed and recorded common statements and shared phrases that seemed to recur. The researcher asked herself van Manen’s selective questions: “Are there any phrases that stand out? Can we select some sentences or part-sentences that seem to be thematic of the experience?” (van Manen, 1990, p. 94). Thus, the themes that arose in all four of the teachers’ transcripts developed into the five essential themes of this research.

**Strategies for Achieving Validity/Trustworthiness**

Maxwell (2005) stated that the vital concern regarding validity is that the researcher examines “competing explanations and discrepant data” (p. 126), and that one’s research does not develop into “a self-fulfilling prophecy” (p. 126). He believed it
is important that the researcher informs readers of any validity threats with the study and formulates possible solutions to those problems instead of assuming an airtight conclusion. The researcher was mindful of her biases, preconceptions, and tendency toward foregone conclusions, and she bracketed all of these away to achieve trustworthiness, as well as she possibly could. To strive for validity and trustworthiness, the researcher employed the strategies of journaling, field note-taking, prolonged engagement, and ongoing member-checking.

Being aware of problems that might harm the credibility and/or trustworthiness of this research, the researcher organized her thoughts and strategies by adhering to Schram’s three suggested questions:

What are the primary ways in which I might be mistaken about what is going on?
Why do I think that these particular challenges to the credibility of my research are especially serious? What do I plan to do to address these challenges and enhance the credibility of my account and conclusions? (Schram, 2006, p. 173)

The researcher utilized the protocol of prolonged engagement, which is “the investment of sufficient time to achieve certain purposes . . . Prolonged engagement also requires that the investigator be involved with a site sufficiently long to detect and take account of distortions that might otherwise creep into the data” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 301-302). Ample time was allocated when interviewing the third grade teachers to allow them to thoroughly express their lived experiences and their perceptions of their students’ experiences. It was important that this process be extended over the period of three months to give the teachers time to reflect, and to once again experience the
phenomenon of preparing for and administrating the high-stakes, standardized testing. Also, six hours of observational time in each of the teachers’ classrooms was dedicated to better understand the participants’ lifeworlds.

The additional validation strategy employed in this study was member checking. The researcher emailed the emerging themes to the teachers after the interview transcriptions were analyzed to have the teachers member-check the themes. When the analytical process and the written first draft were completed, the researcher emailed the draft of the study to the four interviewees and asked them to judge the truthfulness, accuracy, and correctness of their interpretations and conclusions. Many qualitative researchers consider member-checking to be the most important strategy for establishing validity and trustworthiness (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005). It brought a notable credibility and value to this research study.

Frequently, the researcher looked for discrepancy in the data and continually examined her biases, judgments, and assumptions. In these ways the researcher validated what the teachers said occurred during their experiences and in their lifeworlds. Conscientiously, the researcher tried to build transparency into this study through the four validity and trustworthiness strategies formerly presented. The researcher acknowledges that she cannot restrain all of the risks to trustworthiness and validity.

**Ethical Considerations**

Rubin and Rubin (1995) detailed ethical responsibility as “avoiding deception, asking permission to record, and being honest about intended use of the research” (p. 94). The researcher sought to ensure that the teachers included in this study were not hurt
financially, physically, or emotionally because they participated in this study. The permission of the teachers was requested and secured before audiotaping. A pseudonym first and last name was created by each teacher to protect her privacy. Also, the obscurity of the school settings was maintained for privacy (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The names of the schools were invented for anonymity. Before the first interview, the participants were informed that they could modify the information that they revealed at any time. Additionally, the participants were advised that they could withdraw from this research if they chose, without any consequences. Demonstrating respect for the participants, if they asked the researcher about her feelings on a topic, she answered honestly. The researcher valued the participants’ comments, opinions, and expressions (Creswell, 2007; Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Summary

In this study the researcher employed the methodological principles developed by Husserl (1960, 1964) and advanced by van Manen (1990). The four participants involved with this research were selected from 19 participants of seven focus groups from a preliminary study. They possessed the number of years of experience and the dedication to the research that would enhance this study. The researcher collected the data through a brief questionnaire, three hour-long interviews with each of the four teachers, and 24 observational hours of the teachers instructing and interacting with their students in their classrooms. The collection of artifacts related to the OAA testing and research field notes aided in understanding the phenomena.
Data analysis was conducted utilizing four levels of phenomenological analysis: epoché (bracketing), phenomenological reduction, horizontalization, and imaginative variation. Thematic analysis was achieved by applying van Manen’s (1990) three methods to interpreting transcripts and text: “the wholistic reading or sententious approach,” “the selective or highlighting approach,” and “the detailed reading or line-by-line approach” (p. 93). As van Manen (1990) suggested, the researcher tried to ignore the incidental themes to bring forth the essential themes to ensure that the teachers’ experiences did not lose their fundamental meanings.

Validity and trustworthiness were woven into this study by the prolonged engagement of investing sufficient time to interviewing the participants, ample observational time in their classrooms, and ongoing email communications with them. The researcher incorporated member-checking by emailing all of the participants regularly to verify the emerging themes. In the closing stages of the process, the findings were emailed as an attachment to each of the participants for verification.

Ethical considerations were carefully regarded, and the researcher was cautious that the teachers included in this study were not harmed financially, physically, or emotionally due to their participation. The permission of the teachers was requested and secured before audiotaping. A pseudonym first and last name was created by each teacher to protect her privacy, and the names of each school was invented for anonymity. The participants were informed that they could retract anything that they said or revise any information that they provided. Additionally, the teachers were advised that they could suspend their participation in this research without any negative repercussions.
In the next chapter, the findings from this study are presented including relevant information and the personal experiences of the participants. Analysis is provided in Chapter 5 to better understand the teachers’ experiences and their students’ experiences with the OAT (OAA).
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

This research study’s goal was to attain a comprehensive understanding of four third grade teachers’ experiences and their perceptions of their students’ experiences with the Ohio Achievement Assessment. Consequently, all participants involved with this study currently teach third grade and have had the experience of preparing their students for the OAA and administrating the OAA. They are situated in an urban, suburban, and rural school district in northeastern Ohio. All of the teachers expressed interest in this research study and generously shared their experiences and perceptions regarding the state-mandated tests, their students’ experiences, and NCLB.

Promoting insight into their experiences with the OAA, the teachers’ dialogues helped to develop an understanding of their lifeworlds relating to the leading question that directed this study: What are the experiences of four third grade teachers regarding the Ohio Achievement Assessment? This main question formed the basis for the composition of the questions asked during participant interviews. Often, this leading question served to ignite a conversation during which the participants led the way to the topics that affected their lifeworlds concerning their OAA experiences.

Other leading questions that directed this study were:

- What are the third grade teachers’ perceptions of their students’ experiences with the OAT (OAA)?
• How do third grade teachers describe the influence of the OAT (OAA) on their third grade curriculum?

• To what extent do the third grade teachers report that the OAT (OAA) has influenced their pedagogy?

Below are the five essential themes developed from the teachers’ understandings regarding their experiences of preparing for and administering the OAA:

1. The home environments of students influence classroom learning and produce a perceived achievement gap between environmentally disadvantaged students and their affluent counterparts.

2. Participants’ perceived effective teaching practices and curricula have been altered by test preparation; thus, according to the participants, the test preparation reduced enriching learning experiences for students and created a stifling teaching environment.

3. The OAA produces adverse emotional experiences for the participants and their students.

4. The OAA is poorly designed and developmentally inappropriate for third grade students.

5. High-stakes testing pressures negatively affect the morale of the four teachers.

These essential themes were identified during participant dialogue through the van Manen (1990) process of free imaginative variation described earlier in this document. Not knowing the experiences of each other, all of the teachers reported quite similar experiences and emotions regarding their preparation for and administration of the OAA.
Correspondingly, all four teachers expressed congruent perceptions of their students’ reactions to the OAA testing preparation and testing events.

The lifeworld existentials are explained by van Manen (1990) as, “the structure of the human lifeworld, the lived world as experienced in everyday situations and relations” (p.101). When the human lifeworld is examined closely and reflected upon, van Manen rationalized that we can gain knowledge from others’ experiences. This knowledge can lead us to a greater understanding of how we can improve our world. The four lifeworld existentials that van Manen used for guides to reflection are: lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality), and lived other (relationality).

Lived space, or spatiality, is the physical environment in which one lives and the experiences one has in that environment. As van Manen (1990) illuminated, “The home reserves a very special space experience which has something to do with the fundamental sense of our being” (p. 102). Lived space, or spatiality, can be related to a student’s home environment and the quality of parenting in that setting. It can also be applied to the lived space of the classroom. This was a prominent theme in the teachers’ understanding of how their students could successfully relate and achieve on the OAA.

Lived body, or corporeality, refers to our bodily expressions and emotions. Corporeality helps us to understand the experiences of others as they express their feelings, reactions, intuitions, and instincts. We can relate to these human expressions and emotions to come to a knowing of how others are in their lifeworlds (van Manen, 1990).
Lived time, or temporality, is not clock time, but a subjective time that is a temporal dimension. All people have a personal lived time, which tends to accelerate when they are enjoying themselves, such as spending time with friends. In addition, personal lived time seems to decelerate when one is in a situation, which is not pleasurable, such as waiting in a doctor’s office waiting room for an appointment. Temporality helps one relate one’s experience to another being through personal time association. This time correlation helps one recount one’s lived experience to another (van Manen, 1990).

Lived other, or relationality, is the lived relationship we sustain with other people and things. We develop a relationship with a person or thing to search for meaning and to transcend our selves. Usually, one makes contact with another person or thing in a corporeal way, which for people can be a handshake and for domesticated animals can be petting. We look to the “other” to form a personal relationship that will enrich our lives through that person or thing and to find our purpose in life. To form a better understanding of others’ experiences, we must understand their relationality to others (van Manen, 1990).

These four lifeworld existentials can be differentiated; however, they should not be separated since they combine to make one’s lifeworld. To develop an understanding of another’s lifeworld, the researcher uses phenomenology as “almost meditative, yet highly reflective attentiveness to the concreteness of the ordinary things of our world” (van Manen, 2002, p. 24). A study of the lifeworld of individuals can be understood as the study of being in the world or the manner in which one lives in the world (Heidegger,
The lifeworld of another can be understood through combining the concepts, standards, and perspectives utilized by phenomenology and hermeneutics to offer comprehension and perceptiveness of human experiences (Dees, 2000).

Often, one’s lifeworld is hidden by oneself so as to hold on to one’s mystery and privacy. Phenomenology can help to uncover the “hidden” parts of another’s being and lifeworld. The hidden or lifeworld can be exposed to become meaningful for the participants and others (van Manen, 2010). The four lifeworld existentials of this study’s findings have been constructed, organized, and illustrated in Figure 1.

**Effects of Students’ Home Environments**

The students’ lived spaces, or spatialities, produce positive or negative learning experiences and impact the academic dispositions of the students. Each of the participants expressed a concern that her environmentally disadvantaged students lacked developmentally enriching experiences when compared to their affluent counterparts. For example, the participating teachers believed that the limited exposure to high quality vocabulary, common in affluent homes, affected the environmentally disadvantaged students’ success on the OAA. According to the participants, affluent students set the state norm on what students should be able to know and do in the third grade.

Environmentally disadvantaged students have a difficult time in many different academic areas. Ms. Kasey Lee, a rural teacher, spoke about her students’ home experiences and their effects on the students’ learning and OAA scores as she understands them:
Figure 1. Themes from third grade teachers’ lived experiences of knowing in preparing for and administering the OAA. (adapted from: Savage, 2006, p. 14)
There’s so many broken homes in our district. Most students from broken homes have some learning problems. I feel better saying it’s not economics, it’s more about the parenting skills that affect our students’ learning. The home environments of my students really affect their knowledge and the kinds of experiences that they’ve had. . . . So, their home environment does affect their learning which affects their OAA scores.

Explaining her beliefs of how her students’ home environments produced an achievement gap between her environmentally disadvantaged students and her environmentally affluent students, Ms. Kasey Lee continued explaining:

I do see an achievement gap because we have [rich resort area]. We have the really high kids, and we have the really low kids. Sometimes, when I give math tests, I would have the students get either As or Fs, not much in between. Now, that’s an achievement gap! And this is what I mean, we have [rich resort area], and we have trailer courts. I don’t want to say because they live in a trailer that they are low, but they don’t get the enriching activities to help them learn.

The other rural teacher in this study, Ms. Teresa Kristan, spoke about some of her and Ms. Kasey Lee’s students’ home experiences that affect their students’ learning and OAA scores:

I do believe that children’s home environments affect their learning and success in school. We have the affluent families that give their kids enriching learning experiences, and then, we have families that struggle to feed and clothe their kids. Some are worried about survival issues, whether they are going to be safe and
have food. They do not teach their kids life-skills or give their kids enriching learning experiences.

Ms. Teresa Kristan conveyed that she saw an achievement gap between those students whose parents were more educated and those students whose parents had little education. She feels that a home environment, which consisted of at least one educated parent, provided a better foundation of learning on which the student could achieve in her classroom and succeed on the OAA. Additionally, she was saddened that she perceived many of her students’ home environments as lacking economic and parental supports needed to attain high-level learning, which she believes is required to pass the OAA.

Ms. Savannah George, the urban third grade teacher in this study, spoke of an achievement gap between her students who had enriching home environments and her students who came from neglected home environments. She commented about the home environments of some of her students and how those environments affected their learning and OAA scores:

We have many students who come from deprived home situations . . . So, we have children coming into kindergarten who have never held scissors, or have written their names, or used glue appropriately. Those children are already starting a year or two years behind. Yet by third grade, we’re expecting them to read so many words and do all these math computations for the OAA. So, those poor children are already at a disadvantage . . . It’s hard to make up for deprived home situations.
Ms. George echoed some of the concerns of the rural teachers. However, this segment of her interview highlights that it is not only during the school year that these differences in home life surface; it is actually the abilities that the students had when they started school in the first place. As Ms. George noted, many of these children were behind in kindergarten, so to think that during the third grade year these differences can be overcome is not realistic and is emblematic of the overall problem. The home situation matters. Ms. George knows that in one academic year she cannot make up for these disadvantages. This adds to her frustration with the system and the home life of these children. Ms. Chloe Daniels also highlighted similar family concerns.

Ms. Daniels explained her belief concerning her students’ home environments and the effects of a perceived achievement gap between her environmentally disadvantaged students and her environmentally affluent students that affects the combined OAA scores of her class, her school, and school district:

We have a lot of single parents or divorced. If one thing I could change about this school is having the parents improve their parenting skills . . . I don’t think that they realize the consistency needs of their children because we get zero homework back. The lack of parenting skills does affect the students’ learning, which in turn, affects the OAA scores . . . Learning is not a priority, which affects their OAA scores. So, the achievement gap that I see is related to the quality of their home environments, which affect their OAA scores.
Ms. Daniels expressed this same belief that the other teachers in this study confirmed. The parental influences and parenting skills of their students’ parents had a great impact on the students’ classroom learning, which affected their OAA scores.

Each teacher described how the home environments of her students either supported the students’ classroom learning or undermined the students’ learning opportunities. Thus, these home environments had a direct effect on the students’ OAA test scores, which in turn had an impact on the class’s combined OAA scores and the accumulative scores of the school and school district.

**Limiting Enriching Learning Experiences and Narrowing the Curriculum**

The classroom environments encompassed students’ lived spaces, or spatialities, during their time at school. Their experiences in those lived spaces provided a focus on how well they were learning and thriving. The students’ well-being and progress in learning were two of the major concerns of each of the participants in this study.

During my observation times in the four teachers’ classrooms, I witnessed many OAA preparation lessons. After inquiring about the standardized, repetition-type lessons that I observed, each teacher revealed that she did not want to present the monotonous lessons, but that the lessons were mandated by her school district to prepare the students for the OAA. In addition, the teachers felt that if they discontinued the uninteresting, yet required lessons, their students might not achieve as well on the OAA. Additionally, all of the districts’ administrators instructed the teachers to use the regimented, OAA preparation materials that their district had purchased, especially the Buckle Down OAA Preparation Series and Practice Tests (a commercial, test preparation workbook for the
OAA), which were considered uninteresting, bland, and boring by most of their students. However, all of the teachers felt it was their responsibility to use the *Buckle Down OAA Preparation Series and Practice Tests* even though they considered the series uninspiring, formulaic, and counterproductive to their students’ interests.

This conflict between the teaching practices demanded by the districts’ administrators and the ideals of effective teaching practices held by all of the participating teachers caused each teacher undue stress. Each teacher felt that she had abandoned many of the values and standards that she had acquired during her academic and teaching years prior to the NCLB mandate. For example, Ms. Savannah George explained how her administrators’ prescribed test preparation (test prep) affected her students and her.

*I feel that if I overdo test-prep, they get sick of it. I get sick of it. We get sick of it. I’ve backed off these couple of weeks, and I noticed that they seem a little fresher when they are looking at it. So, that’s something I want to look at doing next year. Maybe, once a week, instead of everyday, doing a half an hour. Maybe, once a week do 45 minutes or, maybe, an hour. So, I’m still getting the time in, but they don’t feel like everyday I’m hammering them.*

Like Ms. George, all of the teachers tried their best to meet their administrators’ directives to use the mandated test-prep materials purchased by their districts to prepare the students for the OAA although, oftentimes, this led to stifling, uninteresting lessons.

*At our first interview meetings, I gave each teacher an attractive, colorful notebook and asked her to record some of her experiences, feelings, and her observations*
of her students during test preparation for the OAA. Ms. Kasey Lee summarized her beliefs and thoughts marvelously on the pages of her multicolored, memory notebook. I especially asked her to think about whether or not the OAA has affected her students’ learning experiences in her classroom. She replied:

    I recorded this in my memory notebook: We have gone over so many test questions for the OAA, *Buckle Down*, etc., that some of my students have just tuned me out. “A” students keep working, but nonworkers cause more trouble by breaking pencils, talking out, and picking on each other . . . I’m tired of the test-prepping, and I’m sure my students are tired of it, too!

Sunnyside Elementary’s principal at the rural school gave directives to his teachers that they were not to waste time on enrichment activities and teach only the subjects and skills that were found on the OAA from January until after the OAA at the end of April. Furthermore, he instructed the teachers to organize all of the students’ learning in the same format that is presented on the OAA. Ms. Teresa Kristan was diligent to follow her principal’s directives to provide only OAA preparation during the months of January, February, March, and most of April. However, she discovered after a while that her students lost interest and were reluctant to do their best on their OAA preparation assignments. She articulated the following concerning how her effective teaching practices have been negatively altered by her principal’s orders. She explained:

    He [the Sunnyside principal] wants everything we do to be in OAA test format. Like the things I was just grading, everything I do must be in OAA test format. I don’t like that it’s all consuming. Especially, from January to May, it is all that
we do . . . When the students are getting the same test-prep over and over, they just don’t want to do it. I think some of the materials are boring and some of it is a bit challenging for them. They just give up. I try to change it so that the test-prep is not so monotonous, but it is so standardized that they get tired of it.

Each teacher spoke about how the students became disengaged with the Buckle Down Test Preparation Materials and the released OAT practice tests.

The teachers felt that it was unproductive for their administrators to mandate that they use all of the materials purchased by their districts for OAA preparation. Furthermore, the teachers felt that they could not utilize their effective teaching practices during standardized OAA test preparation. As an example, when I asked Ms. Chloe Daniels if she felt that the OAA had influenced her effective teaching practices, she replied:

Yes, I believe the OAA has affected my teaching practices. Some of my students need their assignments broken up into chunks so they can finish them. I used that strategy a lot more before I gave the OAT. Now, I don’t do that as much. Even though it helps some students be successful, they have to get used to doing a large amount of work all at once for the OAA.

Further explaining how the test negatively altered her effective teaching practices, Ms. Chloe Daniels described:

All during the year, when they don’t understand something, I help them with it. Often, if they don’t understand a question, I can reword it in a different way. And then, they can figure it out. If I could just reword what the test question is asking,
and say it in a different way, I know half of my kids could get it. But now, during the test I can’t help them.

This inability to help the students when they needed extra assistance, attention, and support was considered a flaw in the OAA protocol by all of the participants. They believed that it was possible to support their students without giving answers to their students.

Ms. Savannah George’s conveyed this same belief in the following:

I think there are some kids too, that sometimes, I can see them starting to shut down. And if I would’ve just been able to go over and say, “Hey, you’re doing a good job, keep it up,” but I can’t even walk around the classroom. I can’t say anything to them. The only thing I can say to them is what is written in the script in the manual. That is the only thing I am allowed to say to them . . . They [the students] raised their hands. They wanted help. And I couldn’t help them. And I had to tell them I couldn’t help them. I watched them shut down. I thought: I have totally gone against everything that I said I was going to do as a teacher to help children.

All of the teachers believe that the OAA testing procedures have had an adverse influence on their effective teaching practices because of the strict protocol against emotionally supporting students.

When I asked Ms. Chloe Daniels if the test preparation or the *Buckle Down OAA Preparation Series and Practice Tests* affected her, she responded:
I miss the fun stuff, like when we’re reading a story about Ramona and, “OK, let’s do this crazy lesson where Ramona did this experiment. Let’s do this experiment, and let’s write about it.” What happened to the creativity? We don’t have time to do the fun, creative lessons anymore.

In addition to limiting their teaching practices to standardized test-preparation, all of the principals of the participating teachers in this study instructed the teachers to focus their curriculum on the OAA tested subjects of reading and math during the months leading up to the OAA testing.

The principals believe that by spending more time on reading and math during January through after the testing dates in April, the students would have a better chance of passing the OAA. Ms. Teresa Kristan discussed her principal’s directives:

The time in my classroom between January and April is becoming more test-centered instead of learning-centered. Everything during that time is geared to the test. I dread that time period . . . The principal told me not to have the students do their journaling after January because all we’re suppose to do after January is test-prep. We don’t do journaling, and we don’t do free sustained silent reading or read-alouds until after April to get the students ready for the OAA.

Ms. Teresa Kristan’s Sunnyside Elementary principal directed her to not allow her students to participate in journal writing, free sustained silent reading, read-alouds, social studies lessons, or art until after the OAA.
Due to her principal’s limiting of curriculum before the OAA test dates, Sunnyside Elementary’s Ms. Kasey Lee felt a loss concerning the imbalance that had developed in her curriculum. She explained this curriculum imbalance below:

I didn’t teach any science for four weeks before the test. I taught math twice a day. So, instead of teaching math half of the day and science the other half, I only taught the math . . . I would do my regular lessons in the morning, then we would do test-prep in the afternoons. Then, when it got down to the last four or five days, we did test-prep both periods. We did *Buckle Down* [test preparation booklet] and went over all of the old test questions. At first, I was keeping my mornings as smooth as I usually did. Then in the afternoons, we did test prep.

This overemphasis on test preparation was dictated to each of the teachers by her district’s administrator.

According to Ms. Teresa Kristan, the principal at Sunnyside Elementary monitors her teaching daily and very closely. She whispered that he often walks into her classroom unannounced to examine what her students were doing and what she was teaching, sometimes, several times a day. Although she said that his presence did not intrude on her students’ learning or on her teaching, it bothered her that he was scrutinizing her students’ activities to make sure that they were OAA related. Below is an example, which she offered:

My principal came into my classroom and said, “What are you doing with all of these Dr. Seuss activities?” When we did our Dr. Seuss unit, he questioned me about it. I had to show him that I made up questions that looked like the OAA
format with extended response and multiple-choice questions asking about vocabulary.

Although all of the teachers were not monitored as closely as Ms. Kristan, each of the teachers said that she was asked by district administrators if she was using the purchased OAA test preparation materials.

Ms. Savannah George described that she felt that her administrators wanted her to singularly teach to the test. She said that they were concerned that the third graders would not get enough reading and math instruction to pass the OAA since the OAA scores of their urban district had been low in previous years. The administrators told the teachers to do as much test-preparation as possible during the months leading up to the testing. She revealed her thoughts on these directives below:

Sometimes, I feel that I’m teaching to this test, even though it is based on the standards. But at the same time, there’s other things that I’d like to be doing with them that I can’t because I don’t have the time for them, like more science experiments, art, social studies projects . . . I can’t get to them because I have to concentrate on the reading and the math OAA preparations.

All of the teachers were directed to teach to the test by their district’s administrators. Each teacher reported that she believed that teaching to the test was necessary to keep her teaching position and to prepare the students to pass the OAA. In addition, each teacher conveyed that she felt that many important learning experiences were not being offered to the students because of the lack of time due to the test preparation.
Ms. Chloe Daniels expressed the same concern about her administrators’ directives of test-preparation overshadowing meaningful learning. She commented: “We do so much to prepare them for the OAA that we’ve taken away real hands-on, fun activities that actually produce more learning and better results. And I think we have lost the teachable moments, too.” She expanded on her thoughts concerning this narrowing of her curriculum:

We used to be able to do more. If there was something interesting going on, say maybe, someone brought in a praying mantis, or something like that. And the students really didn’t know anything about it. I thought we could stop and take the time to learn about something that they were interested in.

Now, we can’t. I have to say, “Well, that’s really cool, but we don’t have time. We have to get through this, and this, and this.” We can’t take time to learn anything beyond what’s on the test and the standards. We’re really pressured to make sure we get through all of the curriculum that is going to be needed to pass the test.

It’s sad that we’ve lost those teachable moments.

Not only do the teachers believe that they have lost teachable moments and important learning lessons, but they believe that the mandated test preparation is taking up too much time, which has proceeded to narrow their curricula.

Ms. Kasey Lee believes that test preparation mandated by her school district narrowed her third grade curriculum to include only those subjects, topics, and skills
included on the OAA. This curriculum narrowing was a significant theme that emerged during Ms. Kasey Lee’s interview as the ensuing details reveal:

I have seen a narrowing of the curriculum because we do little social studies, science, or art. When our last principal was here, we were really struggling . . .

And it finally got to the point where he would say, “Forget about the science and the social studies. Work on that math. Work on that math and that reading.” So, all we did was math and reading.

Ms. Kasey Lee explained how she was obligated to follow her district’s administrators’ directives to narrow her curriculum by not teaching science or art during the month of March and the first three weeks of April to prepare her students for the math section of the OAA. She expressed a concern for her students’ learning regarding these administrators’ mandates, but justified the administrators’ dictates by saying that the administrators were desperate for the state funding that was attached to the district’s OAA scores. This was the main reason that she felt that her district’s administrators eradicated her schools’ expressive art program as she described below:

Another change in our curriculum this year is the absence of our art program. We had an excellent art program. But they did away with it at the end of last year. I was so surprised that they did away with the art program for this year because we had such a wonderful art program . . . I feel that we lost our art program because of the OAA . . . I believe if the state put as much emphasis on art, as it does with reading and math, we would get our art program back. I definitely think they did
away with our art program because they wanted the students to spend more time to improve their reading for the OAA.

Both of the third grade teachers at the rural Sunnyside Elementary mourned for their absent art program that they knew enriched their students’ lives.

Confidently, Ms. Kristan told me that she sometimes defies her principal’s mandate of no art and coordinates an art project into a reading lesson. She said that she proudly hung her students’ art creations on the walls in the hallway. The following is her experience of the reaction from other teachers and her professional beliefs about her principal’s no-art dictate:

I’ve had teachers say things about my students’ art displays out in our hallway. One of the fourth grade teachers said, “I miss art. Oh, in fourth grade all we do is study for the test. We have no time for art. I don’t know how you have time to fit that in. All we do is prepare for the test, read, and answer test questions.” Many teachers were saying that they were surprised that I taught the art lessons and that I was allowed to teach those lessons because our principal doesn’t want our students to do art. He only wants the students to do test preparation. We are only supposed to teach what is on the test. Our principal said, “If it’s not on the test, then we don’t teach it.”

Thus, the teachers at rural Sunnyside Elementary felt bounded by their principal’s directives. Both teachers believe that their present students were not being offered the quality education, which their former students secured because of the abandoned art program at their school.
When Ms. Teresa Kristan was presented the opportunity to teach third grade at her school, her principal gave her a multitude of released OAT tests and told her not to teach any reading or grammar skills that were not presented on the released tests. Also, he furnished a list of reading skills that he had received from an OAT Preparation Meeting for her to refer to when planning her lessons. He informed her that she was not to deviate from this list. Ms. Kristan explained some examples of his orders:

Last year, I was told not to teach grammar. He [her principal] said, “Don’t worry about grammar. It’s not on the test.” I told him that there is grammar involved with the OAA. I argued with him . . . My principal has said, “Integrate the grammar into your reading lessons. Don’t waste your time on grammar lessons.” So, it’s the same thing with the art. He says, “Don’t waste time on art. Don’t do projects. You really don’t have time for that.” They [the district’s administrators] want the kids to be proficient in academics. Art’s not academic. It won’t help them pass the test. That’s what they think. That’s why we have no more art program.

Saddened, Ms. Teresa Kristan felt a loss for her students. She explained that her students were not receiving the quality education, which she hoped for them. Their curriculum was lacking many enriching learning experiences, which she felt every child should have. These neglected learning opportunities were ones that she wished her students could enjoy, and ones that she felt were important for her students to have the chance to explore and accomplish. She detailed her concerns:
I think the students are missing a lot of learning experiences that they should be having. We’re not spending time on social studies, or poetry, or art. They’re not doing expressive readings, like plays, or reports, and other learning experiences, and other standards that would help them in many ways, but we don’t have time to do because they’re not on the test.

Bravely, Ms. Teresa Kristan conversed with her principal regarding the directed, narrowed curriculum:

I said last year [to her principal], “These students have to know grammar. If they don’t get this now, it may compound and spiral.”

And our principal said, “Well, you have all of May to teach them grammar.” I think he was half joking. He said it in a joking manner, but I think he meant it because he still didn’t want me to be teaching grammar. So, I essentially have one month to teach all of the third grade grammar!

Wondering about Ms. Kristan’s students’ reactions to her limited curriculum during the months of January, February, March, and most of April, we discussed her students’ disappointments in not being able to participate in free sustained silent reading, her read-alouds, their journal writing, and art. She exclaimed that her students’ reactions were of discontentment, regret, and frustration to the narrowed curriculum during those months. I particularly asked about their reactions to not being able to experience their free sustained silent reading time and her read-alouds, which she previously told me that they enjoyed during the first four months of the school year. She described:
They get upset because they look forward to it [free sustained silent reading time] and enjoy it. They ask me, “Can we read? We haven’t had free reading forever! You haven’t read us Harry Potter forever! Will you read to us?” If there wasn’t the OAA test, I would have read to them every day. I would give them free reading three times a week if we didn’t have the [OAA] test.

The participants in this study reflected on the kinds of learning experiences that they were instructed by their administrators to provide for their students. All of the teachers remarked how they and their students found the repetition of paper-pencil, practice testing for the OAA to be monotonous, wearisome, and uninspiring. Yet, each teacher felt that she was constrained by her district administrators’ directives to present the OAA preparation materials and released OAA tests to their students, even though each teacher believed that by doing so, she was not utilizing her most effective teaching practices and narrowing her curriculum to the detriment of her students’ learning.

**Negative Emotional Responses to Testing**

Lived body, or corporeality, refers to the teachers’ and students’ emotions and their bodily expressions (van Manen, 1990). Corporeality helps us to understand the teachers’ and students’ experiences of interacting with OAA test preparation and with the test itself. The teachers’ and students’ expressions of their feelings, reactions, intuitions, and instincts allow us to comprehend their lived experiences. By relating to their human expressions and emotions, we can come to a knowing of how they are in their lifeworlds (van Manen, 1990).
During our first interview, which took place seven weeks before the year’s OAA testing, all of the third grade teachers expressed a concern for their students’ success with the OAA. The teachers expressed varying degrees of apprehension, nervousness, uneasiness, and discontent with their thoughts of the upcoming OAA events. Each teacher conveyed past experiences of her former students, and after the testing, expressed her perceptions of her current students’ testing experiences. These expressions from the teachers produced the corporeality theme of this study: The OAA produced negative experiences and various adverse emotions for the four teachers and some students.

Ms. Savannah George shared her first experience with administrating the OAT [OAA]. She expressed her frustration with not being able, according to the rules of the test, to assist her students with the directions, an unknown word, or to answer their questions during the testing:

I was very stressed before the test even began. I was stressed for the kids to even take it because I had to make sure the test was laid out just perfectly, and the pencils were sharpened. And the kids couldn’t leave the room. And if they left the room, they could only leave one at a time. And they weren’t allowed to talk to anybody else when they left the room. Well, I didn’t know who else was in the hallway. You know, I can’t police the hallways and the classroom. I had a migraine by the time it was all said and done.

During our second interview, I asked Ms. Savannah George about her experiences and her students’ past experiences with OAT (OAA); she conveyed the following:
I’m always nervous. I want the kids to do so well. A lot of their well-being is riding on this one test. And I try to explain that it means so much to them, to the teachers, to our building. And they can’t understand that. There is a lot of stress on the teachers and the principal in our building. The kids don’t understand the full capacity of what this test really is for them and us, the report card indicators, the funding, and other stipulations that get put on us due to their scores. They don’t understand that, nor do I think at the ages of eight and nine, they should have to understand that. It’s not their responsibility at their age to understand that or the pressures.

In the course of our first conversation, Ms. Chloe Daniels spoke about the negative feelings that the OAA caused for her and her students. Ms. Daniels presented the following details:

The first time that I gave the OAT I felt a lot of pressure, a lot of anxiety. I was nervous knowing that I had to cover all of the skills that were on the test and worrying that I might have missed something or that they needed more practice with something. And I saw that my students were very anxious, too.

The teachers in this research expressed stress as one of their main emotions. “Stress” was the one emotion found most often in the transcripts of each of the teachers’ interviews. Here is an example from Ms. Kasey Lee, one of the rural teachers:

The teacher stress is terrible. I have a pain in my back that I think is related to the stress of the OAA. I haven’t been sleeping well at night. I did go to the doctor’s to get some medication so I could sleep at night. An anti-depressant, so I can stay
calmer. I keep thinking about the test and, “Why didn’t I try that this way? Maybe, I should try it this way. Or, why didn’t I do that?” I just can’t stop thinking about it, and I couldn’t get to sleep. Then, I start worrying and thinking of more ways that I can help them.

Ms. Lee’s colleague at Sunnyside Elementary, Ms. Teresa Kristan, described her own anxieties, uneasiness, and fears concerning the OAA testing in the following vignette:

I sometimes have trouble sleeping because I’m thinking about the test. That’s the biggest thing. I’m having trouble sleeping. It’s very nerve wracking. It is a reality that if I don’t get high enough scores, I will not have my third-grade teaching job. The principal has said, “We’ll see how the test scores are. I’ll let you know if you have to change grade levels.” I think he is serious when he says that . . . I do feel like I am being judged by the test scores.

Ms. Teresa Kristan not only had trouble sleeping because of the pressures placed on her regarding the OAA, but she revealed that she has had at least one nightmare due to her anxieties related to the OAA score results. She disclosed:

I get nervous before the test, even the fall test. This past fall, I had a nightmare that the principal and I were in his office, and he said, “None of your students passed the OAA. I’m very upset. I can’t believe that not one of your students passed the test!” Then, we got a phone call about my husband and my son who were in a car and got into a car accident. Then, I had to go to the hospital.
Those are my two worse fears. So, I do think subconsciously, I am very nervous about it. I do take it very seriously. So, on that level, I am very concerned about it. When I told the principal about my nightmare about the test and the accident, he said, “You’re losing your mind.”

I said, “Well yeah, because of all the pressures about the OAA!”

All of the teachers related their personal experiences of their worries, anxieties, and nervous tensions that they felt were related to their involvement with the OAA. Furthermore, the teachers disclosed several of their students’ personal encounters with the OAA. Ms. Savannah George conveyed the following experience of one of her former, borderline autistic students who had pronounced frustrations during his interactions with the standardized OAT test:

I had a student a couple of years ago who actually just threw everything off of his desk, and threw up his hands, and said, “I’ve had enough of this!” And he ran out of the room. So, we had to bribe him to come back. But that was disruptive to the entire group. He was very frustrated. He wanted nothing more to do with the test. He was borderline autistic, but he had to take the same test. I felt sorry for him and for the rest of my students. But there was nothing I could do, but tell them to go back to work and do their best.

Ms. Chloe Daniels told about some of her previous students’ reactions to their OAA testing experiences. She divulged:

I see my students getting very nervous about it. They’re really nervous about it . . . I’ve had students cry before and during the test. I’m sure it’s because of the
stress. It is frequent with the eight and nine year olds. They cry when they get stressed. They get upset.

Expanding her perceptions of how her students have responded to the high-stakes testing situation, Ms. Chloe Daniels spoke about a student’s recent reaction to this year’s OAA testing and her own response to that student:

I was sad because I had a little girl in tears during the reading test. She’s pretty low academically. She’s very slow processing. And it was taking her a very long time. I don’t know if it was because she was seeing other kids done with their tests. I don’t know if she was just feeling very defeated. But she was sitting with her hair like this [head down with hair covering much of her face]. I thought, “Is she crying?” I couldn’t tell because her hair was covering her face. So, I went over to her and handed her a tissue. Her test booklet had little teardrops all over it. So, I had her go use the restroom, and take deep breaths, and say some positive things to herself, and come back.

Every one of the teachers conveyed that they have had students cry in their classroom before, during, and after the OAA test. Each teacher expressed that she believes it was due to the age of the children and the pressures that the students felt to attain the passing scores on reading and math OAA tests. Ms. Teresa Kristan’s students expressed their feelings about their apprehensions concerning the OAA in the following snippet:
I’ve had kids tell me the day before, “I won’t be able to sleep tonight.” Some students that day have told me that they were sick or worried. I try to tell them that it’s not that big of a deal, but they know that it is.

Today, I asked my students how they were feeling . . . I asked them, “How do you feel about the OAA?”

They wrote: “I’m scared. I’m nervous. I hope I can sleep tonight.” It’s sad because they’re just little kids.

Therapeutically, Ms. Chloe Daniels encouraged her students to express their feelings and worries concerning the OAA in their personal, classroom journal entries. She felt this would help them release some of their anxieties, worries, and negative emotions. Below is a narrative of her experience with the students’ sharing of their journal entries:

A couple of my students wrote about the way they feel about the OAA in their journals. They read them aloud today. We have “writers’ share,” and the way they read them touched me. I’ll read them to you. Here’s the first one: “I’m scared, really scared. Do you know why? No, you don’t know why? I am scared because . . . No, I am not going to tell you. I’ll give you one clue. It has a lot of questions. Can you guess?”

And all the students were saying, “OAA, OAA.” They all knew.

Here’s the other one written by another student: “I am scared. I am really scared for our evil, creepy, and a-lot-of-questions test. It’s the OAA test. I want to pass so badly. I’m going to die, oh sorry, I mean cry. Do you see I’m scared?”
This makes me nervous because they both should pass because they know their stuff. The first girl did pass the reading in the fall. The other should have passed, but I think she just froze. I think she got something like a 398, very close.

Every teacher spoke about examples of her students’ nervousness, anxieties, and fears concerning the OAA. Additionally, each teacher told of at least one student who was so upset about the testing event that the student became physically ill before or during the testing. Ms. Kasey Lee conveyed this understanding: “I’ve had students who got so nervous that they actually threw up . . . The principal had to get gloves on, and take the tests, and put them in bags, and send them to Columbus. I didn’t expect that to happen.”

Regarding the same concept, Ms. Chloe Daniels disclosed the following concerning one of her students:

A few years ago, I had a little girl throw-up on her test. And the guidance counselor had to come with gloves on and put her test booklet in a Ziploc baggie. And they mailed it to the state. I thought, “They’re going to count that test?”

All of the participants identified examples of their lived experiences of adverse emotions and negative incidents concerning the OAA testing events. They conveyed numerous examples of their students’ detrimental emotions and troublesome testing experiences, which the teachers viewed as harmful to their students’ well-being.

**Poorly Designed and Developmentally Inappropriate for Third Grade Students**

A key finding that was common to all the teachers was that the OAA was poorly designed and developmentally inappropriate for third grade students. The phenomena
were embedded in the teachers’ descriptions of their students’ experiences with the test. This finding constitutes lived time, or temporality, which is a subjective time that has a temporal dimension and qualities that affect the teachers’ and students’ experiences of their time invested in the OAA test preparation and the testing event.

The first problem that the teachers had with the Third Grade Reading OAA was that they felt that it was poorly constructed due to the confusing terminology included in the test. The format was often confusing to students due to its inferior design. Additionally, they maintained that the Math OAA had too much reading involved, unfamiliar terms, difficult concepts, and a confusing layout that caused ample perplexity among their students, which resulted in an incorrect evaluation of their math skills.

This poor construction of the OAA has been a challenge to the teachers. It has been difficult for them to know in what terminology the test questions will be so that they can successfully instruct their students before the test. Ms. Chloe Daniels explained this part of the problem with the Reading OAA test:

I honestly think that the test is more of a vocabulary test than anything else because of the ways they ask the questions and the words they use. In our reading series, we use “main idea,” and they say “central idea” or “central theme.” They use different terms, and the kids have no clue. So, I’m constantly trying to teach in my class that when the reading book asks for the main idea, it’s asking for the central idea. And the kids are going, “Um? I don’t understand.” As a teacher, I’m trying to say all of the new words, when I just want to get down to the nitty-gritty and have the students find what the main idea is.
Each teacher expressed that she believes that the current OAA’s content should be improved. Ms. Teresa Kristan pointed out several problems that she observed with the Reading OAA:

Some of the things on the [Reading OAA] test are inaccurate. And it drives me nuts because it’s totally unfair to the kids. In 2006 there was a test about skunks. The author said, “I don’t know why people don’t like skunks because they’re beautiful and rarely eat farm animals.” Then later, it said, “They like to eat grubs and worms.” Then, it asked, “Which of the following statements about the passage is true: A. They eat farm animals. B. They eat grubs and worms. C was totally ridiculous. Well, A could have been right because in the passage they stated that: “They rarely eat farm animals.” They do eat farm animals. So, the correct answer was B, but I think that it was too tricky and actually had two correct answers . . . It’s not a fair test because it has too many confusing questions. It seems like the people who made the tests were trying to trick the students. It’s unfair and not well constructed.

Every teacher in this study stated that the reading stories on the OAA were not interesting to their students. They explained that if the reading stories were not engaging, their students would not want to do their best and this would reflect in their reading scores. Ms. Savannah George gave details on why she feels that the composition and the quality of the articles and stories on the Reading OAA cause her urban students to not do well on the test:
I think a lot of our kids aren’t exposed to the vocabulary that is on this test, especially the reading section. They can’t make the connection they need to, to succeed, and achieve a passing score . . . Our kids don’t have those experiences to build prior knowledge on, so they don’t want to read the articles. And they certainly don’t want to answer the questions about something they can’t relate to at all. If the passages were about Jay Z, or LeBron, or somebody that they see and hear about, and are interested in, they might get better results on the test . . . The passages have nothing to do with them. They can’t relate to a number of the passages. They’re about things that are either antiquated, or something that the students that grow up in our neighborhoods would have no access to. There’s no prior knowledge. There’s no text to self-connection. Until they decide to do that, I think those kids that live in your urban settings are going to do poorly on it if it’s not something they can connect to.

Each of the teachers felt that many of her students could not make the necessary text-to-self connections to the OAA reading passages because those students lack the interest, background knowledge, and personal life-experiences necessary to relate to the text.

Ms. Chloe Daniels expressed her convictions regarding the OAA’s composition. She stated:

I think they throw things on there [the OAA] that are tricky. The names are a little bit ridiculous sometimes. I think that a lot of the questions on both the reading and the math are not written well and can be confusing. We’ve [the
teachers have talked about this at lunch. Even as educators, we’ll read and look at a question and think, “Is that the right answer? Is that what they’re looking for?” So, I think that sometimes the kids get confused and will just skip what they don’t understand.

All of the four teachers maintained that the Math OAA has difficult names and unfamiliar terms that cause sufficient confusion among their students which leads to inaccurate assessments of their math abilities. From Sunnyside Elementary Ms. Kasey Lee expressed her uneasiness with the composition of the Math OAA:

The terminology is tricky on the OAA. They’re third graders, and terminology can throw them off. One year, it was using the letter “N” for the answer. They didn’t understand what the N was for. We were using a box, or the blank, or the circle on all of our math papers. And because it wasn’t the same thing, they got confused. They get confused very easily. . . . I think all of the reading on the math test hinders the poor readers. If they can’t read the words, it is going to affect their scores. One or two words can trip them up. . . . One year it was: “three-dimensional figure.” I had never used the term: three-dimensional figure. We called them “solids.” So, that one really confused them. One word can throw them off.

Augmenting her description of how the Math OAA is confusing to her students, Ms. Kasey Lee added:

One time on the OAT, there were all of these instructions up at the top of the page. Then, the students had to do a problem on the middle of the page. Then
farther down, there was another question down below on the bottom of the page. I’ve seen this on three different tests. On one it was a thermometer. The students answered the middle of the page, then skipped right over the bottom. I preach and preach to them that they have to look at the bottom of the page. They are not careful readers.

The confusing placement of directions, commentary, and mathematical problems caused many students to be confused and/or distracted. This produced much anxiety in Ms. Kasey Lee to address these problems in her teaching. She felt it was unfair to the students to trigger such misunderstanding due to the poor designs of the tests.

Additionally, Ms. Kasey Lee described another of these problems:

One time there was a two-page four pointer: Here’s the problem with a menu. They had to figure out how much was spent. Then, over here they had to circle that amount of dollars and coins; that confused them. At the very bottom of the page was the question: “How much change would you get back?” They didn’t even look at the last question. They just circled the coins and thought they were done! So, I’ve been putting it like that on the practice tests, and they skip right over the last questions. So, I don’t think that the developers of the Math OAA have done a very good job with making up the test.

Every teacher expressed the same idea that the creators of the OAA should produce a more young-child-friendly test. Expressing her dissatisfaction with the composition of the Math OAA, Ms. Chloe Daniels said:
The organization and the formatting are not friendly to kids. They had a lot of flipping back and forth between the pages, like they had to turn back to the previous page to transfer that data. I even noticed that some of the vocabulary, the type of words that they used for asking math problems and questions, and even with the reading too, was even more new vocabulary. It was not vocabulary that we used. I was like, “What are they asking? What does that mean?” For my students to understand what they were really asking was confusing. They would go from math expression to number sentence. They want us to expand our vocabulary base, and we’re no longer teaching math. We’re just teaching the new words to understand what they want them to do for the test.

Furthermore, the teachers believe that much of the OAA test is based on reasoning skills that most eight- and nine-year-old students are not able to develop and on too much prior knowledge that eight- and nine-year-old students have not had past experiences to relate to yet. Ms. Savannah George explained this point:

A lot of what is on the test is processing and reasoning skills. And young children this age don’t have those skills. Many of them haven’t developed those skills yet. Developmentally, they don’t have the abilities to do the processing and reasoning. They haven’t had the life-experiences to fully develop those skills . . . I also think that some of the things that we’re asking them to do are way outside the scope of what they’re capable of doing. Their brains are not ready to do some of the skills demanded on the test, and that leads them to greater frustration. And if the students get frustrated, they’re going to shut down. And if they shut down, we’re
never going to reach them. I mean, we’ve lost them. And once we’ve lost them, they’re not going to succeed.

One of the main concerns of all of the teachers was that the test required their students to remain quiet for the full two-and-a-half hours. The teachers perceived this as an unrealistic goal for the students to sit still and concentrate for that long of a period of time. These restrictions in the testing manual caused many students trouble since they found it nearly impossible to sit still and be quiet for that long of a time span. Every teacher felt it was developmentally inappropriate to expect eight- and nine-year-old children to sit still and be quiet for two-and-a-half hours. Ms. Savannah George offered her beliefs on this OAA testing policy:

The test is not developmentally appropriate. I think the whole experience for them is not developmentally appropriate. They are not ready at eight and nine years old to sit for two and half hours with a five minute break in between reading four or five passages . . . Why does there have to be so many reading selections? Just keep it shorter, and, maybe, the scores would go up statewide if the kids were not having to sit there for two and a half hours, half the school day. No one should expect eight and nine year olds to sit there for two-and-a-half hours.

Adults can’t do that, let alone children. Movies are not even two-and-a-half hours long because they know people will lose interest at the end.

From Metta Elementary, a suburban school, Ms. Chloe Daniels explained her beliefs concerning the length of the OAA:
Eight and nine year olds are not equipped to sit and concentrate for two and a half hours. It’s become a test of endurance because it’s too long for eight and nine year olds . . . Developmentally, it has been said that children can only concentrate and focus for one minute per year of their age. That would be only nine minutes. So, why are we making them take a two-and-a-half-hour test? It doesn’t validly assess their learning. If you want to do something more valid with them, give them a 20-minute test for five days. I just think it’s too long. I definitely feel that the reading test should be shorter with, maybe, only two or three passages and less questions. Also, make the math test shorter and only test on the skills that they should have mastered in third grade, not any advanced math skills like that are on the test now.

Ms. Kasey Lee of Sunnyside Elementary, a rural school, communicated her thoughts and beliefs about the length of the OAA:

The tests are too long . . . The lower-ability students can only work for the first 45 minutes or an hour. After that, they just write anything. Even adults find it hard to sit for two and a half hours. Even when I’m grading papers, I have to get up and move around.

Furthermore, Ms. Kasey Lee explained that since the practice of having students sit quietly to concentrate for two and a half hours is developmentally inappropriate for eight- and nine-year-old students, she rarely requires this of them. She said:

Their homework is 10 minutes. When I give them a test, they’re done with the test in 15 minutes. We have been building up their tolerance by giving them the
old tests. We get them online. We want them to get used to taking the test. We hope that we can get them used to focusing for a longer time. I don’t think it is working. There isn’t anything in our classroom that we spend two hours on.

Also, at Sunnyside Elementary Ms. Teresa Kristan expressed her concern over the length of each of the OAA tests:

Eight and nine year olds have a very hard time sitting and concentrating for two-and-a-half hours. The length of the test is developmentally inappropriate. It has been proven that eight and nine year olds cannot focus for that long. So, I think it is ridiculous that they are being asked to sit for that long and concentrate for those two tests . . . It’s hard for some of them to sit still for the entire two-and-a-half hours. They fidget and hang out of their chairs. They’re looking all around. The attention span of an eight or nine year old is not that long.

Two-and-a-half hours is too long for an eight or nine year old to sit in a chair. They get tired of sitting.

I’m very antsy after the two-and-a-half hours. And I think about the workshops I go to. If they don’t let us get up, get a drink, or have a break to just talk to each other, we’re dying just sitting in our chairs. They have to be quiet the entire time. I can see them looking at me frustrated. It’s become a test of endurance more than anything else.

Understanding her students’ developmental and physical problems with the two-and-a-half-hour time span of the OAA, Ms. Savannah George explained why she felt
that the OAA tests were developmentally inappropriate for third graders. She described this from a personal perspective:

    The length is not developmentally appropriate for third graders. I don’t give my students any assignments in which I expect them to work non-stop for two and a half hours. I can’t sit still for two and a half hours, and I’m 36 years old. So, how can I expect an eight or nine year old to sit for that long working on a test?

Although she feels that the length of the tests and the duration needed to successfully complete the tests are not appropriate for her eight- and nine-year-old students,

Ms. Savannah George knows that it is her job to prepare her students for the long tests.

Ms. Savannah George explained part of her strategy for preparing her students to sit for a long span of time by using their sustained free silent reading time to progress their perseverance. She detailed:

    We had that time today to do an hour of sustained silent reading. We start out at about five or 10 minutes at the beginning of the year and work up. Now, today we read for an hour. We usually average, since the end of February, anywhere between 30 and 35 minutes for sustained silent reading everyday. I try to build up their tolerance to read for as long as they can to get ready for the OAA. It’s like training them for a test of endurance.

Ms. Teresa Kristan recalled her teaching strategies to develop her third graders’ length of concentration and diligence to work successfully on the OAA tests. She explained that even though she felt that the tests were too long, she did her best to prepare her students for the OAA. She clarified:
When we’re allowed to do sustained silent reading, I’ll give them 12 minutes or 15 minutes. But some days when they’re engaged, and they’re really into it, I’ve let them go for as long as 40 minutes hoping to build up their endurance and concentration for the OAA.

The teachers each expressed that the OAA should be reduced to an hour-length test for perhaps several days, instead of the present requirement that students sit and concentrate for two and a half hours.

Common to all of the teachers in this study, these findings demonstrate that the OAA is poorly designed and developmentally inappropriate for third grade students. All of the teachers felt that the composition of the test was lacking the quality needed to sufficiently engage their students and to provide their students a valuable, authentic assessment. Due to the many flaws of the OAA, the teachers questioned the test’s significance and worth. The teachers believed that the OAA was not developmentally appropriate for third grade students due to the length of the test, which requires eight- and nine-year-old students to sit silently and concentrate for a two-and-a-half-hour span of time.

**Teachers’ Morale Negatively Impacted by the High-Stakes Testing**

Every teacher in this study described situations regarding the OAA and its results that negatively impacted their personal teaching morale. An “other” can positively or negatively affect one’s personal morale (van Manen, 1990). This relationality, or lived other, is the lived relationship we hope to develop with other people and things. We develop a relationship with the person or thing to search for meaning and to know
ourselves (van Manen, 1990). The teachers in this study originally formed a relationship with the OAA that they hoped would benefit them and their students. They anticipated that the OAA would be an assessment that was a valuable tool in their strategies for helping their students. Unfortunately, the teachers found that they were sorely mistaken, disappointed, and confronted with more problems than they could ever imagine.

They conveyed that their district administrators often blamed them for their students’ low scores. They expressed feelings of disempowerment from being unable to perform at the high level of teaching that they had formerly held before NCLB and/or of the quality of which they had been academically prepared. Previously, the teachers were allowed to decide what learning experiences were best for their students. Now, they felt that their administrators, who only wanted the students to attain passing scores on the OAA, were making many of these important decisions for them. Responsibly, the teachers desired to promote a loving, caring community-of-learners model of educational environment in their classrooms where the whole student is nurtured, not just his or her reading and math abilities. They felt that their district administrators and the government demanded that they revert back to a factory model of education that stressed only academics and standardized test results. Ms. Savannah George expressed her beliefs about her district and the state’s emphasis on test outcomes: “All students can’t be expected to learn and achieve at the exact same rate. These are individuals, not machines that the teachers can program into producing results.”
At Metta Elementary, a suburban school, Ms. Chloe Daniels compared her district administrators’ concerns and the state’s objectives as a factory model type of education, too. She exclaimed:

We don’t all start with the same raw materials. Like if they’re going to produce a product in a factory, they have the same raw materials, and they go through the same process. And they get the same end product. We have students with different abilities and reading on different levels. They come in with different backgrounds. They have different make-ups, they’re not all the same. So, why do we expect them to be all the same?

At the beginning of the year, we’ve got such a diversity of abilities and backgrounds and cultures. And then at the end of the year, we’re judging them on the same thing. And they should all be at the same level and have learned exactly the same way. We have to have the same finished product. It doesn’t work that way. We’ve got children, not little products!

Ms. Chloe Daniels detailed that she was frustrated by the unrealistic type of education that was being endorsed by her district’s administrators and by the state leaders. She felt disempowered by the restrictions placed on her professional judgment and on her learning environment.

Each teacher spoke about how she felt that the developers of the OAA dismissed her professional judgment. The test manual gave strict rules about what to say to the students. Teachers needed to follow the manual’s script and were not allowed to vary from the manual’s directions. When Ms. Chloe Daniels’ young student started to cry on
the day of the Reading OAA test, Chloe experienced much frustration due to the OAA manual’s directives. After she noticed that her young student was crying, she second-guessed her professional judgment. She detailed:

I even questioned myself, “Am I allowed to even go see if she’s OK? Can I go tell her to get a drink of water? Can I tell her to go calm down?” Well, that’s a student that I care about and want to do well. So, why should I feel like I can’t support her? I was afraid that I was breaking a rule because I wanted to make sure that she was OK. Like, she left the room to go to the restroom, and I didn’t know if I could follow her to make sure she was OK. And then, I was like, “You know what, forget it.” And I met her at the doorway in the hall, and said, “Look, you are going to be fine. Go wash your face with cold water. Take a few breaths.”

However, Ms. Chloe Daniels explained that her professional teaching morale had been negatively impacted by the OAA rules, which she feels diminishes her caring and support for her students.

At the urban elementary school, Karuna Elementary, Ms. Savannah George communicated that her administrators reproached the Karuna teachers for their students having a high amount of unanswered questions on the OAA. She detailed:

Our building in the past has always had the highest percentage of questions that were left blank [compared to the other five elementary schools in the district]. We have felt some pressure from the administrators to correct this. I have constantly tried to drill that into my kids: “Don’t leave anything blank. Don’t
leave anything blank!” It gets discouraging when you feel that you have done everything possible to get the kids in the habit to fill in all of the answers . . . I know I’m basing my teaching abilities on the scores. It’s the mindset we get into.

Ms. Savannah George concluded that she experienced a diminished sense of self-worth due to evaluating her teaching abilities on her urban students’ OAA scores.

In the suburban elementary school, Metta Elementary, Ms. Chloe Daniels spoke about how her administrators gave her directives to limit educational experiences from January though the end of April after the OAA testing dates. She said that these directives affected her autonomy and teaching morale. She expounded:

There are a lot more wonderful things that I would like my students to experience, but we can’t because we don’t have the time. Like this week, I’m teaching nutrition in health. And I wanted a nutritionist to come in to talk with my students about nutrition. I wanted her to come and present some nutrition lessons on healthy foods versus nonhealthy foods, and do some taste-testing, and share some recipes. And that’s never going to be on the test. And she’s not allowed to come because our principal said that we weren’t allowed to have any guest speakers until after the testing. We can’t take the time to do those lessons.

These directives made Ms. Chloe Daniels feel a sense of loss of control over her curriculum and teaching strategies, which impinged her teaching morale. She questioned whether the administrators had the best interest of her students in their plans.

Enriching learning experiences were extremely limited by the Sunnyside Elementary principal. Besides giving the teachers directives to limit all learning to the
subjects and skills that were presented on the OAA, he allowed no guest speakers or field trips until after the OAA testing dates. Ms. Kasey Lee explained, “We were told that we were not to take field trips until after the OAA is over. The administration doesn’t want us to take time away from test prep.” This decision added to the Ms. Lee’s frustrations regarding what she could plan for her students’ learning, negatively impacted her academic freedom, and adversely affected her teaching morale.

According to Ms. Savannah George, the district administrators placed a lot of the blame for the urban district’s low OAA test scores on the district’s teachers. Constantly, on professional development days, the administration pointed out why the teachers were not having the students reach the 400 scores to pass the OAA tests. Savannah noted that rarely did the administrators, particularly their curriculum director, express any concern about their students’ learning, but especially, the curriculum director’s interest was completely placed on the OAA test scores and why the students were not passing the test. Ms. Savannah George noted, “She [the district curriculum director] cares only about the passing scores on the OAA. But is that really learning? I guess it’s learning to take a test.” Ms. Savannah George often felt that her district administrators were blaming her for her students’ low test scores, which diminished her teaching morale.

Additionally, the teachers believed that their administrators, their community, and society at large judged them according to their students’ OAA scores, as well as the NCLB’s labeling of their schools and districts. At Sunnyside Elementary, Ms. Kasey Lee described that she felt that the only aspect of learning with which her administrators were concerned was the scores on the high-stakes, standardized test. She did not like the fact
that the teachers were being evaluated on their teaching abilities due to the scores that the students received on the OAA. She articulated, “I feel that everybody is judging us by our scores. I have to base everything on the test scores, which puts a lot of pressure on me.” These high-stakes testing pressures eroded Ms. Kasey Lee’s self-confidence and self-worth.

Ms. Kasey Lee’s colleague, Ms. Teresa Kristan, felt under even more pressure from her administrators since she was a beginning teacher. She disclosed:

My principal said to me, “We’ll see how the test scores are this year, and if the test scores aren’t good, then I’ll talk to you. And we’ll need to reevaluate things.” And that upset me because it shouldn’t be based on the test scores if he thinks I’m doing a good job. He’s always telling me that I am doing a good job. That’s what I don’t understand. How can it be if I do such a good job and they want me here, but if the test scores are bad, then I’m not doing a good job? I feel like I’m being judged on test scores . . . My principal told me that he might change me to a different grade if my scores are not high enough. My job is based on that. He said, “We’ll see when the scores come back.”

Her principal’s decision to base her job and his evaluation of her teaching skills on her students’ test scores caused Teresa much anxiety and lowered her teaching morale.

At the suburban Metta Elementary, Ms. Chloe Daniels reported that she felt that the media was to blame for perpetuating the “good school, bad school” and “good district, bad district” labeling. She clarified:
I think it’s become more of a competition between districts. And I think our city and our newspaper [have] made it a competition in our area. Real estate agents will say, “Buy your house in this city because they have been rated Excellent.” We are becoming over-crowded in our schools because of the number of new students moving in. In some other districts, they say, “Don’t buy a house in this district because they haven’t met AYP.” That’s not fair to those districts and those teachers to label them like that. If you look in the newspaper when they report the standings, and you put the socioeconomic status next to each of the districts, you would have the same rankings. But they claim, it’s not tied to that.

All of the teachers felt that the media unnecessarily blamed the teachers and schools for the students’ low test scores. They viewed this blaming as unproductive and harmful to the students, schools, faculties, and communities.

At rural Sunnyside Elementary, Ms. Teresa Kristan expressed a similar sentiment regarding the releasing of the scores to the public and the media’s sensationalizing of the scores. She protested:

I think it’s not proper or fair that everyone judges us on our OAA scores. They should not be given to the press and printed in the papers. That does not help us to improve learning for our students. It doesn’t help us in any way. It often serves as a low point and reduces our reputation. It’s just not fair to do that to the students, teachers, our school, or our town when we have tried our hardest to do our best.
Ms. Teresa Kristan articulated that others’ negative evaluations of her teaching abilities due to her students’ OAA scores damaged her self-confidence and self-worth as a professional educator.

Each teacher truly feels that her district’s administrators and the state leaders have diminished her teaching morale due to their overemphasis on high-stakes, standardized test scores. All of the teachers insisted that their teaching morale has been damaged by the NCLB-mandated, high-stakes testing environment.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter the findings from this hermeneutic phenomenological study of Ms. Savannah George, Ms. Chloe Daniels, Ms. Kasey Lee, and Ms. Teresa Kristan’s OAA testing experiences were documented. Chapter 4 was organized to answer the main question: What are the experiences of four third grade teachers regarding the Ohio Achievement Assessment? The four participants’ perceptions of how their students experienced the OAA test preparation and the high-stakes testing were detailed. The transcripts that aided in the design of this chapter revealed five essential themes that appeared in all of the participants’ testimonies.

The five essential themes that developed out of the transcripts are:

1. The home environments of students influence classroom learning and produce a perceived achievement gap between environmentally disadvantaged students and their affluent counterparts.

2. Participants’ perceived effective teaching practices and curricula have been altered by test preparation; thus, according to the participants, the test
preparation reduced enriching learning experiences for students and created a stifling teaching environment.

3. The OAA produces adverse emotional experiences for the participants and their students.

4. The OAA is poorly designed and developmentally inappropriate for third grade students.

5. High-stakes testing pressures negatively affect the morale of the four teachers.

These five essential themes are analyzed and discussed in Chapter 5. In addition, the following chapter summarizes the experiences and the beliefs held by the participants, which were revealed during the preceding interviews with each of the teachers. Additionally, educational implications, future research questions, and the concluding commentary are offered in the final chapter.
CHAPTER V
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Summary of the Study

This hermeneutic phenomenological research was implemented to gain an in-depth understanding of four third grade teachers’ experiences with high-stakes, state-mandated testing in Northeastern Ohio, public school settings. An examination of their experiences with the high-stakes tests since the 2003 inception of the Third Grade Ohio Achievement Test (OAT) and the 2009 establishment of the Third Grade Ohio Achievement Assessment (OAA) due to the mandates of NCLB was documented. Additionally, this study proposed to understand the third grade teachers’ perceptions of their students’ experiences with the OAT (OAA), and to what extent the third grade teachers described the influence of the OAT (OAA) on their curriculum and pedagogy.

The guiding question of this research study was: What are the experiences of four third grade teachers regarding the Ohio Achievement Assessment? Other important questions that directed this study were:

- What are the third grade teachers’ perceptions of their students’ experiences with the OAT (OAA)?
- To what extent do the third grade teachers report that the OAT (OAA) has influenced their pedagogy?
- How do third grade teachers describe the influence of the OAT (OAA) on their third grade curriculum?
The teachers’ experiences formulated the essential themes, which were reflected upon to understand the phenomena described in their transcripts. Conducting thematic analysis is both useful and necessary in developing a true understanding of what is being examined. Thus, the process of thematic analysis is explained as, “a free act of ‘seeing’ meaning” (van Manen, 1990, p. 79). In the participating teachers’ texts, I analyzed the experiential structures that composed their lived experiences. Utilizing van Manen’s (1990) wholistic (sententious), selective (highlighting), and detailed (line-by-line) reading approaches to analyze my data, I looked for comparable themes. Subsequently, these themes provided a focal point of the interviews. Frequently, I emailed my participants to verify the meaning of these themes and their experiences. Conscientiously, all participants emailed their input to me and member-checked their discourse faithfully.

In this chapter the predominant themes that developed from the teachers’ transcripts and were identified through the analytical research process are examined. In addition, potential educational implications of each theme are offered and discussed. Future research questions are suggested. An inclusive discussion and conclusion follows.

The first essential theme that resounded in the text was that the home environments of students influence classroom learning and produce a perceived achievement gap between environmentally disadvantaged students and their affluent counterparts. This first essential theme was expressed by all of the teachers both as a positive and negative aspect. On the positive side, the teachers believe that if students have at least one educated parent who nurtures them and provides for their essential needs, these nourishing experiences will prepare the students to learn. The teachers feel
that educated parents provide enriching learning experiences such as: frequently visiting the library, reading books together, or going to the zoo and museums that help the students acquire a solid foundation on which to build new learning and to be successful with the OAA. Also, the participants credit educated parents as serving as role models of good English and advanced vocabulary, and they present a positive attitude towards school.

On the negative side, all of this study’s participants reported having some students who have uneducated parents who cannot or do not promote early learning experiences. Often, but not always, the difference between these two types of parents is socioeconomic. If students come from disadvantaged home situations, those home environments may produce adverse attributes that may unconstructively affect the students’ learning, concentration, and progress in school, thus generating low OAA scores for those students. However, all the teachers feel that with an abundance of assistance, students can overcome outside forces to become successful in learning and achieving passing scores on the OAA. Internal motivations, as well as external support systems, can help at-risk students excel.

Furthermore, all of the teachers perceived an achievement gap between home-environmentally deprived students and home-environmentally advantaged students that negatively affected the combined OAA scores of the class and school. The major problem that seemed to influence the education of numerous students in all of the schools was the poverty level. The percentage of economically disadvantaged students in the urban elementary school was 87.2%. In the rural school, the percentage of economically
disadvantaged students was 54.9%, and both teachers regarded that as a high percentage. Whereas the suburban school had only 38.4% of economically disadvantaged students who made up its population, Ms. Chloe Daniels was convinced that this “high” poverty level, which influenced over a third of her students, adversely disturbed her students’ learning.

The teachers believed that the achievement gap often hindered attaining the desired school or district state rating, making AYP, reaching the coveted number of state indicators, meeting their performance index goal, and/or accomplishing their value-added measure objectives. When asked what factors caused the achievement gap, the teachers stated that the socioeconomic statuses and the educational levels of the parents shaped the students’ learning, which in turn impelled the students’ OAA scores. All of the teachers remarked that an achievement gap had a definite effect on their class’ OAA scores, their school’s OAA totals, and their OAA districts’ results. Consequently, all four teachers in this study believe that there are home conditions that are beyond their control that manipulate their students’ learning, progress, standardized testing abilities, and OAA scores.

This research uncovered the four teachers’ beliefs pertaining to their effective teaching practices being adversely altered by test preparation for the OAA and the negative narrowing of their curricula. This study’s second essential theme developed when all participants noted that they were directed by their school administrations to frequently use OAA test preparation materials to prepare their students for the tests. Often, the teachers felt that the test preparation materials did not provide the enriching
learning experiences that they wished for their students, but instead produced stifling, limiting experiences for students and teachers alike. Ms. Savannah George explained her feelings regarding the OAA test preparation when she said, “I feel that if I overdo test-prep, they get sick of it. I get sick of it. We get sick of it.”

Each of the teachers shared that many of her “teachable moments” were lost or not pursued because of the need to do all of the test preparation materials required by her administration for the OAA. Also, the teachers avoided hands-on, fun, creative learning lessons from January until the end of April because of the requirements made by their administrators that they use the standardized OAA test preparation materials purchased by their districts and the downloaded OAT practice tests from the ODE website.

This overwhelming need to do test preparation instead of enriching learning activities was confirmed by the teachers’ regulated pencil-paper-type lessons. The most drastic example of the OAA reducing learning experiences for students was that of Ms. Teresa Kristan’s account of her principal’s limitations on sustained silent reading, student journaling, creative writing, poetry appreciation, expressive readings, plays, reports, grammar lessons, and social studies projects from January until the end-of-April OAA-testing date. In addition, all of the administrators required that field trips be taken only after the OAA test dates. Every teacher involved with this study reported that she was instructed by her administrators to make sure that she frequently used the old, released OAT tests to prepare her students for the OAA. This frequent, practice testing caused most students to become bored and uninterested in the practice-testing protocol.
Additionally, the teachers participating in this study expressed their concern regarding their third grade curriculum being limited to reading and math lessons from January through the end of April after the OAA testing. Because of the pressures to have their students pass the OAA, the teachers were told by administrators to limit science, social studies, and art instruction. In addition, Ms. Savannah George reduced her book studies, creative writing and art, while Ms. Chloe Daniels remarked:

As the time gets closer to the OAA more and more subjects go by the wayside, and we focus mostly on the reading and the math . . . Then after the tests, we can go back to the science, social studies, art, and all the other fun learning activities.

Problematically, Ms. Kasey Lee and Ms. Teresa Kristan were instructed by their principal to teach only what was on the OAA. This directive from Sunnyside’s principal left no science lessons, no social studies, no sustained silent reading, no creative writing, no journaling, no poetry or expressive, enrichment readings, and no art projects in the third grade curriculum from January until the end of April after the OAA test dates. This lack of stimulating curriculum often left the teachers and students uninspired and stultified.

According to the participants in this study, the protocol of the OAA testing has forced them to abandon some of their perceived effective teaching practices such as: social studies and science projects, cooperative learning, and the chunking of assignments into parts for special students to be successful. The teachers each explained in their own terms that learning can be more productive for some students if the teacher breaks long assignments into smaller parts. The chunking of assignments alleviates students’ overwhelmed feelings regarding large tasks. However, the teachers rationalized that
since this could not be done with the OAA, they felt that all students needed to get used to doing large amounts of work at one time so they could successfully negotiate the OAA’s length, which is many pages long and more work than they would usually give an eight- or nine-year-old child. In addition, each teacher described that she scheduled long periods for reading school-related materials to prepare her students to endure the long two-and-a-half-hour testing time frame.

The third theme, which appeared most frequently in the research transcripts, is that the OAA produced negative experiences and various adverse emotions for the four teachers and some students. Such words as: stress, stressful, nervous, fear, fearful, anxiety, pressure, disappointment, anger, tiredness, frustration, worry, and letdown emerged repeatedly throughout the conversations. Some students displayed a number of the same harmful emotions as perceived by the teachers or relayed to the teachers from the students. All of the teachers experienced students crying before, during, or after the OAA testing, especially if they were not capable to finish the test. Several students exclaimed that they had stomachaches or headaches, or said they were physically ill. The teachers each had students who got so nervous about the high-stakes testing that they vomited on their tests.

The teachers included in this study felt sad and helpless because they could not verbally encourage their students during the testing process because of the OAA protocol. According to the teachers’ perceptions, their inability to support their students left various students insecure and unable to successfully negotiate the high-stakes testing. Therefore, with the confirming data and the participants’ validation, I concluded that the
high-stakes OAA testing generated negative experiences and various adverse emotions for both teachers and their students.

The fourth theme that emerged in the transcripts was that the four teachers believe that the OAA is poorly designed and developmentally inappropriate for third grade students due to the extensive length of the tests, the complicated directions, inappropriate verbiage, the inferior structure, and uninteresting passages. The participants conveyed that most students found the OAA reading stories boring and stated that if the students could not make a personal self-connection to the stories, then the students would not try to do their best causing invalid OAA scores. Also, the participants reported that the OAA stories were based on experiences to which their students could not relate. Again, if the students could not relate to the stories they would not do their ablest work, which would cause invalid test scores that would not represent the students’ true achievements.

According to the participants, there is too much writing on the Reading OAA for it to be a true measure of students’ reading abilities and too much reading on the Math OAA to verify the students’ math skills. All of the teachers felt that the Math OAA contained problematical directions, improper terminology, and a low-quality configuration. Each of the teachers described the same substandard designs of the Reading and the Math OAA. The teachers maintained that the OAA design needs to be more child-friendly with clear directions, unobstructed formatting, and fascinating stories with which each child can make a self-connection. Through the teachers’ eyes, this poor quality test caused a substantial number of their students to become disengaged, frustrated, and/or not able to do their best on the test.
The worse flaw of the OAA according to the participating teachers of this study is that the Third Grade OAA is developmentally inappropriate for third grade students due to its two-and-a-half-hour time frame. The teachers contend that most eight- and nine-year-old students cannot sit and concentrate for two and a half hours.

The fifth essential theme that developed from the recorded text was that each of the four teachers felt her morale, self-confidence, and teaching self-worth was diminished by her high-stakes testing experiences. The challenges that the four teachers faced in preparing their students often overwhelmed the teachers and reduced their confidence in their abilities to meet their students’ academic needs. Poor administrative and parental support, high-stakes testing pressures, and bureaucratic control of their curricula caused the teachers to develop low self-confidence in their overall control of their teaching circumstances.

Although the administrators thought it was best to promote test-preparation materials to prepare the students for the upcoming OAA, the teachers felt that the test-preparation was overemphasized and restricted their opportunities to plan meaningful learning experiences for their students. Furthermore, the teachers conveyed that although the administrators believed that they were supporting learning for the OAA, the administrators were taking away the teachers’ professional, decision-making possibilities and academic freedoms. Thus, the teachers concurred that this restriction of their abilities to plan for significant learning experiences harmed their self-confidence and self-worth as professional educators. Furthermore, each of the teachers reported that she
felt that this reduction of professional freedom threatened her morale and the morale of her colleagues.

**Educational Implications and Questions for Future Research**

The findings of this research present the need for changing the current Third Grade OAA assessment practices. Legislators, government officials, and all invested in the assessment process must acknowledge the developmental abilities of third grade students and transform their educational assessments into developmentally appropriate measures. Among the teachers’ responses in this study was the hope that improvements to benefit the students could transpire. This study’s findings emphasize the need to find alternative assessments to the present high-stakes testing. Additionally, this study’s results should encourage administrators and all educators to include high-level learning experiences for third grade students, which would include enriching aesthetic and analytical experiences on a daily basis to help students connect to the learning process. In addition, the following recommendations on the essential themes should aid in improving education for students and teachers alike.

**Theme One: The Home Environments of Students Influence Classroom Learning and Produce a Perceived Achievement Gap Between Environmentally Disadvantaged Students and Their Affluent Counterparts**

Research has shown that socioeconomic and educational levels of parents have a great influence on children’s academic success in school, as well as their social-emotional development (Ryan, Fauth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2006). Consistently connecting childhood poverty to learning problems, many research studies have documented the
negative influence of poverty on children’s successes and failures in school (Dearing, McCarthy, & Taylor, 2001). Living in poverty places emotional stress, as well as economic stress on parents that often negatively affects their parenting practices, which leads to non-nurturing, home environments for their children (Petterson & Albers, 2001). Contrasting underprivileged home environments with affluent families, Rouse and Barrow (2006) insisted that “advantaged families, by spending more money on education outside school, can and will partly undo policy attempts to equalize school quality for poor and nonpoor children” (p. 99). The teachers in this study concurred that their students’ home environments greatly determined their students’ health and readiness to learn, the students’ knowledge foundations on which the students build their learning, and their students’ parental-emotional support.

Demonstrating that an achievement gap can be evident in kindergarten before much academic learning transpires, Hill and Craft (2003) found through their research that Caucasian students significantly did better than their same-age, minority-race kindergarteners on a test of quantitative concepts. Studying first graders’ mathematical skills on both concepts and computation tests, Entwistle and Alexander (1990) found that by the end of a school year, the Caucasian first graders were significantly outperforming the minority-race first graders, which produced an achievement gap between White children and others. Citing the differences in educational levels of the students’ parents, Hall, Davis, Bolen, and Chia (1999) believed that the parents of the higher-achieving students have more education compared to the lower-achieving students’ parents.
Through the eyes and minds of the four participants in this study, an achievement gap between their affluent students and their disadvantaged students was evident in their classrooms. The teachers involved with this study insist that not only are their students’ learning and OAA scores influenced by the students’ school experiences, but that the students’ home environments affect their learning and OAA scores. The participants feel that society, as a whole, should help those less fortunate so that young children do not suffer from poverty and the lack of early learning experiences. Each teacher stressed that the education level of the parents was more important than their socioeconomic status. The participants of this study recommend more societal assistance and education for young parents to improve children’s impoverished home environments. More educational programs that help parents develop nurturing skills and parenting expertise could make a significant difference in the lives of many children who need competent home encouragement, supervision, and positive adult role models.

**Future Research Questions Developed From Theme One**

1. What strategies can educators use in their classrooms to meet the learning needs of disadvantaged students from inadequate home environments?

2. What ways can educationalists support parents and students to provide meaningful home-learning experiences so that disadvantaged students have a firm foundation on which to build future learning?

3. How can concerned citizens affect social policy so that more assistance can be provided for sufficient emotional development and enriching home-learning experiences, as well as basic survival needs for children living in poverty?
Theme Two: Participants’ Perceived Effective Teaching Practices and Curricula Have Been Altered by Test Preparation; Thus, According to the Participants, the Test Preparation Reduced Enriching Learning Experiences for Students and Created a Stifling Teaching Environment

The teachers involved with this study saw much of their curriculum reduced to mostly reading and math from January until the end of April. Reminding us that students learn implicitly our values through our curriculum choices, Eisner (1998) insisted that the absence of aesthetic subjects in the curriculum teaches our students what knowledge is important. Aesthetic education and artistic experiences help students’ awarenesses to connect to the learning process (Henderson & Dees, 1997). This fruitful connection between academics and aesthetic experiences can inspire learners in all subjects, and teach students “how to think,” rather than “what to think” (Henderson & Slattery, 2007). Furthermore, students need to consistently experience all forms of art personally so they can become empowered and create their own meanings (Greene, 1992). The teachers engaged in this study felt that their students were being deprived of an adequate education between the months of January and until after the OAA testing dates because of the lack of aesthetic experiences. Due to their district administrators’ direct orders, the teachers were bound to the test preparation prescribed and purchased by their district.

When the unreasonable conditions of monotonous, test preparation are set up as obstacles, these circumstances will infringe on the students’ freedom to learn. Freedom to learn, to create, to investigate, and to discover must be provided to the students (Greene, 1995). In addition, teachers must provide a curriculum and free environment in
which children can tell their stories, “not only so that we can hear them but so that they can make meaningful birth of their own rationality” (Greene, 1995, p. 54). Students should be given opportunities through enriching curriculum to act out their realities through meaningful play, inspiring aesthetic experiences, their language, and their expressions of life. They must construct their own realities before they can make sense of others’ realities (Greene, 1995). A multitude of critical thinking experiences and aesthetic expressions will allow them to achieve this understanding.

The diminished effective teaching practices and the narrowed curriculum that dwells in the four participants’ classrooms has hampered their students’ growth. Due to the abundant, standardized test preparation, the learners in these classrooms have been deprived opportunities to engage in meaning-making. Although the participants in this study did their best to implement their effective teaching practices and integrate subjects, there continued to be a depressive educational state in each classroom because of the administrations’ excessive emphasis on standardized test preparation. This depressive learning environment has denied the students of opportunities to connect with art and develop aesthetic understandings. This depression of educational experiences can lead to a “distortion of the real purpose of schooling and deprive students of a real education” (Zhao, 2010, p. 29). Although all of the teachers in this study have fought to include critical thinking and aesthetic experiences for their students, their district administrators have demanded frequent, intense test preparation that leaves little time available for enriching learning experiences. The teachers expressed that their present, poor
instructional environments need to be restored to the participants’ former, superior learning environments and higher educational ideals.

This second theme stresses the need to create professional development techniques that will help the teachers to further acquire more effective teaching practices to enrich the learning experiences of their students while preparing their students for the OAA. Implementing the learning sciences of how students learn into teachers’ professional development should help teachers acquire innovative learning experiences for their students while helping their students prepare for the state-mandated tests (Turner, 2011). Moreover, it would be enlightening to learn from more third grade teachers of their experiences with OAA test preparation and how that occurrence affects their teaching practices and the learning experiences of their students. Thus, more research should be attempted to uncover this knowledge base.

**Future Research Questions Developed From Theme Two**

1. How can we create professional development that will help teachers productively integrate their effective teaching practices with test preparation for the OAA?

2. How can teachers maintain, expand, and enrich their curriculum to embrace all third grade subjects and topics that interest and inspire their students while still successfully preparing their students for the OAA?

3. What strategies can teachers use to incorporate test preparation into the third grade curriculum so that it does not become all consuming and centering only on reading and math?
Theme Three: The OAA Produces Adverse Emotional Experiences for the Participants and Their Students

This major finding from this research begs the question: Why must learning and teaching be so stressful? Since the four participating teachers expressed their high-stakes testing experiences as unproductive and subversive to their students and to themselves, this researcher encourages educators to take some positive actions to end the high-stakes testing of third grade students. In her article, “High stakes testing: Why?” Noddings (2004) stated, “We are left with the conclusion that the current emphasis on testing may actually be undermining our efforts to educate.” While Popham (2001) argued that because of pressure-inducing, high-stakes tests, teachers may “be victims of a score-boosting game that they cannot win” (p. 20). I concur with Noddings and Popham’s suppositions, and I propose that actions should be taken to alleviate the tensions and frustrations that high-stakes testing produces for the four third grade teachers and their students.

Until the high-stakes testing of third grade students ceases, I suggest that preservice and on-going inservice opportunities should be provided for teacher candidates and teachers to become more at ease with high-stakes testing and to help them learn strategies to support the process (McNair, Bhargava, Adams, Edgerton, & Kypros, 2003). Suggesting that professional development can help to ease the pressures of high-stakes testing for teachers, Turner (2009) recommended that schools also provide educational “activity nights that both emphasize important academic concepts and relieve students’ stress” (p. 42). Advocating that educators not only teach academic skills, content, and
test taking competence, Cizek and Burg (2006) proposed several strategies, remedies, and preventive measures that teachers and parents can use to help students reduce their negative emotions towards high-stakes tests and to support positive techniques in dealing with the testing culture. Included in these techniques are test-taking skills that all students should have the opportunity to learn, such as time management, pacing, as well as de-emphasizing competition and implementing test preparation activities throughout the year instead of just prior to the test.

This essential theme is instrumental in recommending that the school districts involved with this study should plan professional development that builds supportive curriculum communities to ease the teachers’ negative perspectives and to positively support their teachers emotionally, as well as professionally. These curriculum communities need to be a blessing to the teachers, and certainly, not be an additional burden on them. I advise that these encouraging communities of teachers should provide personal as well as professional assistance for the teachers.

**Future Research Questions Developed From Theme Three**

1. What further actions can help teachers reduce negative experiences and alleviate the adverse emotions of high-stakes testing?

2. What other teaching strategies can prove successful in helping students to ease negative emotions and more positively engage them with the OAA testing events?
Theme Four: The OAA is Poorly Designed and Developmentally Inappropriate for Third Grade Students

The teachers’ appraisals of the OAA surprised and intrigued me. Like many, I assumed that the OAA was well-developed and superiorly designed. I never thought to question the capabilities of the OAA creators or the quality of the test itself. If the test is poorly constructed, and distracted students are unable to engage with the assessment fully, then the data collected from the OAA is questionable at best. Competent university professors and researchers need to appear before the Ohio General Assembly and the ODE to question the quality of the OAA test.

Early childhood developmental researchers have reported their findings that it is developmentally inappropriate to give young children from infancy through age eight years paper-and-pencil assessments due to the focused and extensive periods of attention needed and the substantial verbal abilities required to pass the tests (Gullo, 2006; Lambert, Abbott-Shim, & Sibley, 2006). Additionally, early childhood specialists believe that young students should be assessed for only short periods of time so that behavior issues, restlessness, and/or boredom do not alter the results (Genishi, 1992; Snow & Van Hemel, 2008). Each of the teachers in this research study honestly substantiated that the two-and-a-half hours of high stakes testing was developmentally inappropriate for her third grade students. This study’s teachers maintain that if the federal and state governments mandate a high-stakes test for third graders, at least, the test should be fair and developmentally appropriate for eight- and nine-year-old children.
Believing that assessments can be valid only if they are definitely grounded in students’ experiences, Hill (1994) has argued that responsible, early childhood assessments must be based on the young children’s familiar experiences. Questioning the OAA topics, all participants in this research related that numerous students could not make the text-to-self connection necessary to do well on the OAA because they lacked the standard of living presented in the OAA text. The participants thought that the passages on the Reading OAA and some of the OAA Math content were often grounded in experiences that their students have not had due to their low socioeconomic status. Thus, all of the teachers questioned the validity and reliability of the OAA results. In the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Position Paper on Early Childhood…Assessments… (2003), it asserted: “poor quality or poorly administered assessments, or assessments that are culturally inappropriate, may obscure children’s true intellectual capacities” (p. 10). Accordingly, this study’s participants insist that more effort should be made to encourage the citizens of Ohio to question the quality, usefulness, and value of the Third Grade OAA.

Poststructuralists and critical theorists have continually advised to question the dominant-class, educational practices and the results that those cultural traditions have on the minorities (Rust, 2009; Ryan & Grieshaber, 2005; Wynne, 2005). In this case, it is vital that the structure and content of the OAA be examined in order to determine the validity and reliability of the assessment. It is imperative that competent experts, who are unrelated to the ODE and the test producers, analyze the OAA. The following questions should be considered: Whose knowledge is being assessed? Is that knowledge being
used to dictate the dominant culture’s power structure to oppress minority cultures and values? What mores are being tested? Are the minorities’ and disadvantaged students’ cultures, customs, and interests represented on the test? How are the test scores being used and for what purposes? These are vital questions that should be addressed at each grade level of the OAA, not just the third grade test.

The teachers who shared their wisdom in this study have made valid criticisms concerning the OAA. I conclude that measures must be taken to improve the Third Grade OAA so that it becomes the reliable assessment instrument that it was meant to be, so that it is developmentally appropriate for eight- and nine-year-old students, and educationalist can receive a true picture of students’ abilities. Now, steps need to be taken to improve the Third Grade OAA for the teachers’ benefit and students’ well-being.

**Future Research Questions Developed From Theme Four**

1. What actions can be incorporated to insure that the OAA is well designed and containing culturally appropriate topics with which every child in the state can relate?

2. Do other third-grade, Ohio educators believe that there is a need for a shorter OAA that is better created with a child-friendly design including age-appropriate terminology, unproblematic directions, trouble-free math problems, and well-written passages and questions?
Theme Five: High-Stakes Testing Pressures Negatively Affected the Morale of the Four Teachers

Although all of the teachers in this study were in charge of their classrooms, they felt a loss of control over their teaching practices and curriculum. They were given direct orders from their administrators to frequently use test-preparation materials and to limit all other subjects that were not included on the OAA at least from January until after the OAA testing at the end of April. Also, the administrators implied that if they did not use the test-preparation materials, they would be insubordinate and that their students would not attain the OAA passing scores. This reduction in academic freedom caused a decline of the teachers’ morale because the teachers believed that they were not doing what was best for their students. The teachers felt that engaging learning experiences and an enriching curriculum would best educate their students. Each teacher felt a loss of control and a forfeiture of influence on their teaching environment. This severely impacted the professional morale of each teacher.

Citing similar findings in their research, Byrd-Blake et al. (2010) related that because of the excessive emphasis placed on state-mandated, high-stakes tests, the teachers in their study suffered a diminished professional morale. Byrd-Blake et al. reported: “This study has demonstrated the pressures of NCLB have made a negative contribution to the morale of both the elementary and secondary school teachers” (p. 469). Like the teachers in the Byrd-Blake et al. research study, the four third grade teachers involved with this research expressed much disappointment in the quality of educational experiences in which their students were bound due to the demands of the
OAA and NCLB. They asserted that their students were being deprived of a quality education that lacked aesthetic opportunities, cooperative studies, and exploratory learning that every third grader should experience on a daily basis because of the high-stakes pressures and administrative directives that oppressed their teaching environment.

**Future Research Questions Developed From Theme Five**

1. How can administrators support their teachers so that the current high-stakes testing environment does not adversely affect teacher morale?

2. Can educational, professional development help support positive teacher self-confidence and enhance teacher morale?

**Conclusion**

The intentions of the policy makers concerning the 2002 ESEA reauthorization, which introduced NCLB, were honorable in that they desired to improve the learning opportunities for all children. However, in the classrooms of this study, the NCLB legislation has not helped, but has hindered students’ learning and the assessment of the third grade students’ true abilities. From this research study’s data, it appears that NCLB has been a continuous assault on the four third grade teachers, their students, and their curriculum. Through the legislation of high-stakes testing, policy makers are treating students as “objects” that need to be regulated and standardized rather than children who are discovering and creating their places in the world. It seems that the legislators’ educational policy refers to students as “raw materials,” “human resources,” or “little
products” as Ms. Chloe Daniels expressed it, that need to be processed and quantified. This inhumane manner of treating third grade students must cease.

The verbiage of the title “No Child Left Behind” indicates a meaningful goal. But, the punitive system that was conceived under NCLB and established in the public schools has truly left behind many of this study’s third grade students by not providing enriching learning experiences and the authentic assessments they deserve. Also, the NCLB legislation has caused several of their teachers’ effective teaching practices and much enriching curriculum to be left behind due to the demands of test preparation. The legislators’ misunderstandings that all beings have their own creativity, imagination, and personal wisdom within them, and that the educator’s task is to help students release these attributes (Greene, 1995) has failed their legislation. The legislators’ notion that only mandated knowledge is valuable is wrong.

The legislators have addled their well-intended, educational law by not comprehensively consulting proper, early childhood specialists concerning developmentally appropriate assessment protocol for young children. Their narrow-minded approach to include eight- and nine-year-old children in high-stakes, standardized testing is perplexing and disturbing. This issue was a major concern for the four teachers involved with this study. In each of their own ways, they questioned and proposed: Did the legislators even consult early childhood authorities or early childhood development specialists? If they did, those early childhood development consultants were wrong to suggest that high-stakes testing of eight- and nine-year-old students is a reliable assessment practice for this age group. Few early childhood development experts
believe that high-stakes, standardized tests should be included at the third grade level (Gullo, 2006; Jacobson, 2000; Lambert et al., 2006; Landry, 2006; Perrone, 1992; Valenzuela et al., 2007; Valli & Chambliss, 2007; Wasserman, 2001).

The four educators participating in this research maintain that policy makers in Washington, DC cannot motivate their students to learn authentically through a penal system of high-stakes testing. They concurred that imposing systematic prescriptions and assessments from afar to improve education is not beneficial or effective for their students’ successful learning. Strong negative repercussions have transpired from the non-local, educational policy because research has shown that local educators better understand how to meet the educational needs of their community’s students (Malen & Rice, 2009). The four third grade teachers believe that policy makers need to trust local educators considerably more.

The participants of this research understand that there are more skills that their students need than just reading, writing, and learning how to successfully manage mathematical problems. The four teachers in this study want more for their students than the basic 3Rs. They cited critical thinking skills, creativity, the pleasure of reading, and the joy of learning as aptitudes that they want to nurture in their students. Yet, they feel restrained by the mandates of their administrators and the high-stakes test to follow a standardized, test-preparation protocol. Until the high-stakes testing of third grade students is eliminated, third grade teachers need to find a balance between enriching, developmentally appropriate, learning experiences, and the standardized test preparation mandated by their district administrators.
In order to change the harmful, evaluation practice of high-stakes, third grade testing, I advocate that concerned citizens unite to bring about political action to cease the high-stakes testing of eight- and nine-years-olds. Educators, parents, and interested others should publicly recommend that appropriate, early childhood teaching practices be restored to the third grade teachers, as well as developmentally appropriate learning experiences and age appropriate assessments for their students. Believing in the democratic process, I encourage everyone invested in this situation to lobby their United States congressional representatives to change the unfair testing of early childhood students.

Until this change can transpire, thorough qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies can help reveal the inadequacies and limitations of the present high-stakes, standardized-testing practices and help to develop more humanistic and reliable means of authentically assessing eight- and nine-year-old students. More illuminating research needs to be implemented to help teachers understand strategies to manage the incongruous, state-mandated assessment practices and learn to handle the testing situations more beneficially for themselves and their students. Additionally, professional development that assists teachers in incorporating highly effective learning experiences that holistically attend to the needs of their students should be planned and implemented.

More meaningful instruction that includes creative thinking, critical analysis, social-emotional development, and students’ self-assessments, and builds on students’ interests and strengths needs to be assimilated into third grade classrooms with guidance
from educational specialists. Furthermore, professional development for administrators needs to be executed to guide principals in proper protocol for effective learning experiences that best serve the students. As a society that values education, particularly that of our children, we need to demand superior learning experiences and age appropriate assessments for our third grade students and educational support for their teachers.

The inept system of NCLB’s high-stakes testing of eight- and nine-year-old students is far too dangerous to be simply left to continue. I acknowledge that a change in the NCLB educational policy will be a complex and difficult undertaking. Throughout the history of our country, some of the most beneficial and progressive changes have come only via lengthy and intense struggles for justice. As citizens, it is our civic duty to protect the youth of the country, and ultimately our future generations, from the peril posed by NCLB. To accomplish this task, we must engage in positive discourse on the possibilities to create educational environments where teachers are encouraged to promote all spectrums of learning, and students are free from the fear of being under the administrative microscope at such an early age in their development.
Appendix A

Research Study Questionnaire

This research study is to investigate teachers’ experiences with the Ohio Achievement Test (OAT) and the teachers’ perceptions of their students’ experiences with the OAT. The main research question is: What is the essence of experiences of third grade teachers, and their perceptions of their students’ experiences due to the mandates of the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the OAT?

1. How many years have you taught third grade at your present school? _______years

2. Have you taught third grade at any other schools? For how many years?

3. Would you be willing to participate in 3 or more hour-long interviews or 2 one-and-a-half-hour-long focus group discussions concerning your experiences and your students’ experiences with the OAT?
   ___________yes ___________no

4. Would you be willing to make brief notes of your experiences with the OAT and your perceptions of your students’ experiences with the OAT?
   ___________yes ___________no

5. Would you be willing to have your interviews/ focus group audio taped?
   ___________yes ___________no

6. Very briefly, describe your overall experience with the OAT.

Name_________________________________________ School __________________________

Pseudonym Name: ___________________________________________________________
APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT LETTER ON UNIVERSITY LETTERHEAD
Appendix B

Recruitment Letter on University Letterhead

Dear (Administrator’s Name):

Greetings, my name is Carie Greene; I am a retired teacher, doctoral candidate, and research assistant at Kent State University. I am writing to you to request permission to interview third grade teachers in your school system as part of my dissertation fieldwork during the Spring 2010 semester.

My dissertation research project, Third Grade Teachers’ Experiences with the Ohio Achievement Test (OAT), examines how teachers align classroom instruction and give emotional support to their students when preparing for and during the OAT. Since its inception in 2003, little research has been done concerning the OAT. Many Ohio educators are calling for more research to examine the OAT, its effects on teachers, students and the curricula and concerning ways to help teachers meet students’ learning needs. I am asking you to help with this examination.

Through interviews and focus group discussions, this study seeks to answer three main questions: (1) What is the essence of experiences of third grade teachers, and their perceptions of their students’ experiences with the OAT? (2) How do teachers align their instruction to support their students’ learning needs before the OAT? And (3) how do teachers support their students’ emotional needs before and during the OAT?

I would appreciate it greatly if you would permit your school system to participate in this project; it aligns well with your schools’ plan to improve instruction and support teachers and students. It will contribute to furthering knowledge of the relationship between the ways teachers support students in their learning concerning the thinking skills needed to successfully negotiate the OAT. The findings from this study have implications for improving classroom instruction, restructuring educational/professional development materials, and teacher preparation programs—providing a rationale for prospective and practicing teachers with an in-depth understanding of how teachers support their students during OAT preparation and implementation.

All teacher interviews/focus group discussions are considered confidential and neither participants nor their school system will be identified in the final research report. Also, participants may withdraw their permission at any time during the study without penalty.
by indicating this decision to the researcher. There are no known or anticipated risks to participation in this study.

I would like to assure you before any interviews/data collection will begin that this study will be reviewed and receive ethics clearance through the Kent State University Institutional Review Board for the Social and Behavioral Science. In addition, my Doctoral Research Committee advisor has approved this study.

If you have any questions about the study, or if you would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision, please feel free to call me at the 330-412-3314 or 330-875-1737 email: cgreene1@kent.edu. I would appreciate any consideration you can give toward your school district’s inclusion in this study and I hope for your support of this project.

Sincerely,
Carie Greene
Kent State University Research Assistant
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