

Accountability Issues and High Stakes Standardized Assessment:
Practices, Challenges, and Impact for English Language Learners

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A dissertation submitted to the
Graduate School of Education
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Education
Graduate Program in Language Education
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New Brunswick, NJ

May 2017

CHALLENGES OF ELLS WITH HIGH-STAKES STATE TESTS

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ABSTRACT

English language learners (ELLs) are the fastest growing student population in American schools. Reform policies represented by the No Child Left Behind legislation has mandated the inclusion of ELLs in high-stakes statewide assessments administered in English. Nationwide, ELLs have been performing below proficient on these mandated state tests. This mixed-methods study examined the extent to which the assessment system addressed the educational needs of ELLs. The study investigated the practices, challenges, and impact of high-stakes statewide assessments on high school ELLs from the perspective of ESL teachers, content area teachers, and ELLs. The study also included an analysis of the testing accommodations provided to ELLs. This mixed-methods study used a teacher online survey and interviews with both teachers and ELLs as sources of data collection. Survey participants included seventy-one teachers while interview participants involved seven teachers and ten ELLs. The findings revealed that the assessment practices used pose major challenges to ELLs who lack proficiency in the English language. Results also showed that the assessment policy failed to acknowledge the challenges ELLs face as well as the unique assessment needs of ELLs. The assessment policy failed to see that the process that works for native English-speaking students does not necessarily work for ELLs. The study highlighted the problems with the assessments used with ELLs and pinpointed helpful testing accommodations and alternate assessment options for ELLs that is hoped to create equity and excellence in the assessment of ELLs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I thank God for giving me the patience and willpower to complete this process. This dissertation would not have been possible without the support and guidance of so many people.

I would like to extend my most profound gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Mary Curran. Thank you for the time you have taken to meet with me, carefully read my work, and provide suggestions for improvement. I am grateful for the opportunity to have worked with you. Our meetings provided wonderful insight into the development of my research. I sincerely appreciate your thoughtful guidance, profound knowledge, and unparalleled level of professionalism throughout this entire process.

I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to my committee members, Dr. Nydia Flores and Dr. Tanja Sargent. Thank you for your helpful feedback, thoughtful comments, insightful suggestions, and belief in my research study. I am extremely grateful for your expertise and your continuous support throughout my time at Rutgers. I have learned more from each of you than you will ever know. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you.

There are many faculty and staff who have helped me on my academic journey. I thank them for their guidance, their advice and for sharing their knowledge. A special thanks goes to my friends and colleagues in this program for their inspiration and their wisdom.

I would also like to thank the participants of this research for sharing their opinions and experiences. Without their interest and enthusiasm, this research would never have been possible.

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I am forever grateful to my family for their ongoing love, understanding, and helping hands. To my dad, Prof. Michel Farah, thank you for all of your encouragement. You paved the way for me by earning your Ph.D. and you always helped me believe that I could do the same. To my mom, thank you for all of your guidance and love. You have supported me beyond measures throughout this journey. To my sister, Magy, thank you for your unfading love and support. To my husband, George, I am eternally thankful. You have supported me in every way since the beginning. Thank you for always being there for me. To my two boys, Michael and Tony, thank you for all of your patience and love. Your continual display of support and sacrifice of time will never be forgotten. I am the luckiest mom in the world to have you. You are my light and inspiration.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Statement of the Problem

The United States is by large a country of immigrants. Census Bureau data show that the nation's foreign-born or immigrant population reached a new record of 42.1 million in 2015 (Camarota & Zeigler, 2015). According to U.S. Department of Education statistics (2016), about 49.9 million students were enrolled in U.S. public schools (pre-K to 12th grade) in the 2013- 2014 academic year. Of them, 9.3 percent or more than 4.5 million children were English language learners (ELLs). Moreover, it is estimated that by 2025, nearly one out of every four public school students will be an ELL (NCELA, 2007).

This demographic transformation has led to substantial increases in enrollment of ELLs in the U.S. public schools (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). ELLs are by far the fastest growing group of U.S. school-age population (Capps et al., 2005; Van Roekel, 2008). From 1995 to 2001, the population of students identified as ELLs grew approximately 105% nationwide (Reeves, 2006). Furthermore, the number of ELL population enrolled in U.S. public schools increased from 4.2 million in the 2003-2004 school year to 4.5 million in the 2013-2014 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Educational reforms, with the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002), mandate schools to focus on the academic achievement of all students, including the ever-growing population of ELLs. Under NCLB (2002), to receive Title III funding which is designated for ELL programs, schools are required to increase the English

proficiency and core academic content knowledge of ELLs. All ELLs' English language proficiency must be tested at least once a year. Also, all ELLs have to take state academic achievement tests. Furthermore, the NCLB Act expected all students, including ELLs, to achieve proficient levels by the year 2014.

With No Child Left Behind (NCLB), high-stakes standardized tests for accountability purposes were being emphasized more than ever before. Under NCLB, ELLs were being held to the same standards and accountability as their native English-speaking peers. ELLs are required to take standardized academic achievement tests that are constructed to assess native English speaking students' content knowledge, in English (Abedi, 2004; Menken, 2006). They are being asked to demonstrate what they know in content areas, such as math, in the English language, and their knowledge in this content subject is evaluated based on what they are able to express in this new language. Most of these standardized tests rely heavily on the students' language proficiency level and as such they are not just content knowledge tests but language proficiency tests as well (Abedi, Hofstetter & Lord, 2004; Menken, Hudson & Leung, 2014). Research, on the other hand, has shown that it takes 5-7 years to attain academic language (Thomas & Collier, 1997).

The rationale behind including ELLs in statewide assessments is to make sure there is accountability for their educational progress (Abedi, 2004; Wiliam, 2010). However, ELLs' educational needs have not been at the center of the educational reform movements, and so most state assessments have been designed without taking the needs of ELLs into consideration (Abedi & Ewers, 2013; Marchant, 2004). As a result, many ELLs do poorly on these tests; their academic performance is well below that of their

native English-speaking peers (Menken, 2006). There has been a consistent achievement gap between ELLs and their native English-speaking peers, shown through higher dropout rates, lower academic achievement, and an overrepresentation in special education programs compared to their native English-speaking peers (Smith, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2012, 2016).

Consequently, there is a significantly lower proportion of ELLs who pass high-stakes statewide tests compared to their native English-speaking peers, especially at the secondary level (CEP, 2006; Kibler, Valdés, & Walqui, 2014; Smith, 2010). ELLs' school performance is consistently approximately 20% to 30% lower than their native English speaking peers and have shown little improvement across the years (Abedi & Dietel, 2004, Menken, 2006). Xiong & Zhou (2006) report that the pass rates of ELLs on mathematics high school exit exams are 30-40% lower compared to the rest of the student population. Similarly, Menken (Menken, Hudson, & Leung, 2014) found out that on average ELLs score approximately 46% below on high school reading tests and 31% below in high school mathematics tests.

The impact of the assessment policies on ELLs' educational experience is great and the stakes are extraordinarily high for ELLs in high school. One study found out that there was a 300% increase in the dropout rate because of high-stakes testing (Marchant, 2004). Another study by the Center for Social Organization of Schools, found out that 2,000 high schools across the nation had dropout rates of 40% or higher. Many of these dropouts leave school after the ninth or tenth grade because they fail mandated high-stakes tests (Goldberg, 2005). Moreover, Menken (2006) reported that the dropout rate of ELLs increased by 14% in New York since testing requirements began.

Reasons to explain poor performance of ELLs on high-stakes statewide tests are complex but to a great extent are related to having to take tests that are not intended for them but that were designed for native English speaking students and so are not aligned to ELLs' educational needs (Van Roekel, 2008). At the same time, these tests are given in English when ELLs' English proficiency level is not developed enough to be able to take content tests in a new language, English (Abedi, Hofstetter & Lord, 2004; Menken, 2006). Consequently, one of the most challenging areas that many schools are finding is increasing the scores and the academic achievement for students in the sub-category of the "Limited English Proficient" students. With their poor performance, ELLs are often blamed for the failure of schools. State and federal policies penalize teachers and schools whose student groups do not meet certain test performance standards (Duran, 2005; Goldberg, 2005).

Due to the rapid increase of ELLs in U.S. schools and the emphasis on accountability (Kibler, Valdés, & Walqui, 2014; Van Roekel, 2008), efforts to address the education of this student population continue to be of great importance. The increase in the numbers of ELLs in U.S. schools coupled with their poor performance raise questions about whether we are meeting the educational needs of this growing population. Rising numbers of ELLs and poor academic achievement indicate a need for change. Based on the consistent achievement gap (Abedi & Dietel, 2004; Menken, Hudson, & Leung, 2014, Smith, 2010), it is clear that the current educational system is not adequately meeting ELLs' educational needs. Without careful examination of how to address the educational needs of this growing group of ELLs, the current educational system will serve to further perpetuate educational inequalities. However, if we are serious about investing in

America's future, then every aspect of ELLs' educational experience must be thoroughly examined and improved.

While federal policy aims to ensure all students receive an equitable education, in practice these policies have produced very poor achievement outcomes for ELLs.

Examining the current assessment policies and practices and establishing a valid assessment system for ELLs is very important as these tests now drive the education ELLs receive, the ways they are taught, and are also used to make high-stakes decisions (e.g. placement of instructional program, grade promotion/retention, high school graduation), as well as in improving the quality of teaching and learning.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze the practices, challenges and impact of high-stakes statewide assessments on high school ELLs from the perspective of ESL teachers, content area teachers teaching ELLs and English language learners. The study examines the extent to which the assessment system used addresses the educational needs of ELLs. Teachers' and students' viewpoints regarding the challenges ELLs face when taking these tests as well as the impact of these tests on ELLs are investigated.

Furthermore, the study includes descriptions and an analysis of the accommodations provided to ELLs during high-stakes testing. The study uses the lens of social justice theory, represented by the work of John Rawls (1971, 2004) and David Miller (1991) to explore whether the educational policies, represented by the mandates of NCLB and its assessment practices, move us closer to or further from the goal of ensuring equal opportunity for ELLs.

Social justice theory offers a way to analyze the assessment system through the

issue of providing equal educational opportunities for ELLs. The results of this study would inform educational leaders as to determine best effective policies and practices in order to create equity and excellence in the assessment of ELLs.

Research Questions

The overall research question guiding this study was:

What are the perspectives and experiences of ELLs and their teachers in New Jersey regarding high-stakes state assessments?

The subsequent research questions for this study were as follow:

1. Do high-stakes state assessments fairly and accurately measure ELLs' knowledge from the perspectives of teachers and ELLs?
2. What kinds of testing support do ELLs receive before taking high-stakes state assessments?
3. What types of testing accommodations are used during high-stakes state assessments to address ELLs' needs? How helpful are these accommodations?
4. What is the impact of the high-stakes standardized state assessments on ELLs?
5. What recommendations can be made to improve assessment practices for ELLs?

Significance of the Study

Due to the growing number of ELL population in the U.S. public school system, it is crucial that educators and researchers identify best effective assessment policies and practices that ensure that ELLs' educational needs are being met. A study involving an important component - assessment, in the education of ELLs at this time has a particular significance.

This study is important as it addresses a gap in the existing research on the inclusion of ELLs in high-stakes tests. The study explored the challenges of high school ELLs with high-stakes testing as expressed by the teachers in New Jersey, and through the perspectives and accounts of ELLs. More often, adult perspectives are sought, and quantitative studies that show how ELLs perform on standardized tests when compared to other students, are used. While examination of student performance data is important, such studies do not tell the experiences, stories, and challenges that ELLs face when taking high-stakes statewide tests. There is paucity in qualitative research involving high school ELLs. Furthermore, the current study is based on the belief that ELLs should be viewed and included as active participants in the implementation of assessment policies, and not just considered as passive recipients. As Rubin and Silva (2003) explain, “without attention to the student experience, we run the risk of reproducing policies and practices that ignore the social character of schooling and undermine the role of students as partners in shaping and changing their own educations” (p. 2).

Therefore, this study addresses the plea for additional research on specific program components, assessment, in relation to ELLs’ educational needs. It focuses on the need to provide equitable education for all students in our schools. As such, the study looks at how we determine retention, promotion, and graduation using high-stakes statewide tests as the only unit of measure of success for all students including ELLs, and if this is equitable. Also, this study is timely as it is conducted at a time when New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) is reviewing all state assessment items to align them to the new standards it is adopting, the Core Curriculum State Standards (CCSS) instead of New Jersey State Standards. This study would help highlight the problems

with current assessments for ELLs and pinpoint helpful testing accommodations and alternate assessment options for ELLs.

It is hoped that this study would contribute to the field of ESL education by serving as a resource for decision makers to utilize in efforts to implement effective assessment practices that would create equity and excellence in the assessment of ELLs. This equity is crucial to increasing the academic achievement of the ELL population. Hopefully, decision makers would be more open to suggestions made by ELLs and their teachers regarding ideas to incorporate into the assessment of ELLs.

Definition of Terms

The terms used in the study are defined as follows:

- Practices: federal and state assessment practices based on assessment policies that regulate the administration of the high-stakes statewide tests to ELLs such as the inclusion of all ELLs in state tests, using same cutoff passing scores for all students including ELLs, allowed testing accommodations, and requirements for getting a high school diploma.
- Challenges: the problems that ELLs face with high-stakes statewide tests as reported by ELLs and their teachers.
- Impact: the consequences and effect of high-stakes statewide tests on ELLs as stated by ELLs and their teachers whether it is academic or psychological.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The need for this study is based on the rapidly increasing number of ELLs in U.S. schools coupled with their poor academic performance on high-stakes tests (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007; Menken, Hudson, & Leung, 2014; Smith, 2010). Rising numbers of ELLs and poor academic achievement indicate a need to address the educational needs of this growing group of ELLs in a way that would increase student achievement and create equity and excellence in their assessment. Literature related to this investigation is reviewed in the following areas: (1) English language learners demographics, background and an overview of the challenges that ELLs face, (2) legal issues related to ELLs, it offers an overview of the Supreme Court and federal law cases that impacted the education of ELLs, (3) standards-based reform and ELLs which details the legislative and policy actions until the implementation of NCLB (4) theoretical framework: social justice theory, (5) ELLs and accountability issues: this section highlights recent policies affecting the education of ELLs (6) high-stakes state tests, (7) ELLs and testing accommodations, and (8) access to the curriculum.

English Language Learners

Demographics of the English Language Learners

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), the percentage of ELLs in U.S. public schools in school year 2013–14 was 9.3 percent, or an estimated 4.5 million students. ELLs are the fastest growing student group in U.S. schools. It is not surprising that the growth in the ELL population in our public schools has also led to an increase in the number of different languages spoken. In California, there are 57 languages spoken

among school-aged children (Capps et al., 2005). Furthermore, in New York City schools, 48% of children in schools are children of immigrant families who speak more than 100 languages in their homes (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2002).

English Language Learners in New Jersey. Approximately 23% of students in New Jersey come from a home where a language other than English is spoken. These students speak a total of 166 languages. Moreover, about 5 out of 6 New Jersey school districts have ELLs in their schools. In 2013, there were 63,739 ELLs in New Jersey schools, that is nearly 1 out of every 21 public school students was an ELL. As of 2013, the top 5 languages spoken by ELLs in New Jersey in order were: Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Haitian/ Creole, and Korean. Passaic county had the largest population of ELLs in 2013 at 12.47% of its total student population while Sussex County had the smallest population of ELLs in 2013 at 0.33% of its total student population (NJDOE, 2014b).

This demographic transformation has greatly changed the way mainstream classrooms look today where students at all levels, throughout the U.S., are becoming increasingly diverse. In other words, language, culture, and socio-economic diversity have replaced the traditional norm of English speaking, White, and middle class (Reeves, 2006).

Although ELLs are the fastest growing student population in U.S. schools; what is most troubling is that these students' academic performance is well below that of their native English-speaking peers. There has been a consistent achievement gap between ELLs and their native English-speaking peers as shown through higher dropout rates, lower academic achievement, and an overrepresentation of ELLs in special education programs compared to their native English-speaking peers (Abedi & Dietal, 2004;

Menken, 2006, 2010; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2009; 2012). There is a significantly lower proportion of ELLs who pass high-stakes statewide tests compared to their native English-speaking peers, especially at the secondary level (Menken, 2006; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). ELLs consistently scored approximately 20-40% lower on state mandated assessments than their native English-speaking peers (Abedi & Dietal, 2004). Meeting the educational needs of ELLs is an investment in America's future. Accordingly, this study attempts to focus more attention on the increasingly growing group of ELLs.

Background of English Language Learners

Multiple terms have been used to describe students whose second language is English. Some of the terms used are "Limited English Proficient" (LEP), "learners of English as a Second Language" (ESL), or "Second Language Learners" (SLLs). They are also referred to as "language minority" (LM), "linguistically and culturally diverse" (LCD), "culturally and linguistically diverse" (CLD), "English speakers of other languages" (ESOL), and "English language learners" (ELLs) (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007; Zehler, 1994).

Some of these terms indicate negative connotations. For instance, the term Limited English Proficient (LEP) has a negative impact as the word "limited" assigns a deficiency to the learner. Furthermore, English as a Second Language (ESL) suggest students had no formal training in the English language. The term "English language learners" (ELL) will be used in this study as it is widely accepted in the literature as it labels the learner positively and reflects the process of language acquisition. The term also focuses on one common aspect among this diverse group of students; that is, they are

all learning English (Kibler, Valdés, & Walqui, 2014). However, the term “LEP” is still used today in federal and state documents.

English language learners can be defined as students whose first language is not English and who are in the process of learning English (Zehler, 1994). The term ELLs describes immigrants or children of immigrants who speak their heritage language at home and so have limited proficiency in English. Some of them are native-born while others are foreign-born (Reeves, 2006).

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2005), limited English proficient students (the term used by the federal government for ELLs) are defined as students between the ages of 3 and 21 who are enrolled in elementary or secondary education, often born outside the U.S. or speaking a language other than English in their homes, and not having sufficient mastery of English to meet state standards and excel in an English-language classroom.

ELLs come from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, from different economic situations, and have come to the U.S. for a variety of reasons; still, they all share the desire and need to learn English. ELLs differ in various ways, including their level of oral English proficiency, literacy ability in both their native language and English, and cultural backgrounds. They may have been born in the U.S., or have come to this country as immigrants or refugees. ELLs who are children of immigrants; although born in the U.S., use their first language at home and so have very limited exposure to English. ELLs born in the U.S. often develop conversational language abilities in English, but lack academic language proficiency. On the other hand, newcomers need to develop both conversational and academic English. ELLs do not yet have sufficient proficiency in

English to be able to succeed academically in mainstream classrooms (Freeman, Freeman & Mercuri, 1993; Zehler, 1994).

The amount and quality of education that ELLs had before entering U.S. schools determine their literacy levels in the native language. Some ELLs are newcomers who arrive in the U.S. with adequate schooling while others come with limited formal schooling. ELLs who arrive in the U.S. with adequate schooling usually possess strong academic language and subject skills in their first language and will, in time, learn to transfer this content area knowledge into English (Freeman, Freeman & Mercuri, 1993; Zehler, 1994). Because this group of ELLs are not proficient enough in English to be able to succeed academically in mainstream classrooms, they spend some years in ESL or bilingual programs before they are integrated into mainstream classes.

On the other hand, some ELLs arrive to the U.S. with limited formal schooling. This group of ELLs may have large gaps in their academic knowledge because they did not attend school regularly in their native countries. These students may lack important native language literacy skills that one would normally expect for students of their age. This group of ELLs is faced with the task of gaining literacy in English while at the same time having to catch up with their peers in subject area content (Garcia, 2000).

Other ELLs may not have had any formal schooling and so may have no literacy in their first language because of the poor quality of previous schooling, due to wars or other circumstances (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2002). This group of ELLs enters U.S. schools with very weak academic skills. High school ELLs with limited formal schooling are most at risk of educational failure. Regardless of their prior educational experience, all ELLs in U.S. schools are required to learn English and academic content

subjects at the same time in a limited period of time. That is, students are not just learning English as a subject matter but are also learning and are being assessed upon standards-based academic content in English as well.

According to Short and Fitzsimmons (2007), ELLs are required to do “double the work” of native English speakers in the U.S. schools. Perhaps a case could be made that they are even required to do much more than just double the work. As a start, they need to learn English in order to be able to compete with their native English-speaking peers and to socialize with them. This is a confusing and daunting task, especially to young students. Moreover, they need to develop their proficiency in academic English, a language they are still trying to learn while at the same time, they have to learn academic core subjects in English at the same pace as their native English-speaking peers. They are also being held to the same accountability standards as their native English-speaking peers. That is, they have to take the same high-stakes standardized tests that have been developed for native English-speaking students.

Moreover, for most ELLs, the U.S. school system is so different than that of their home countries and they need to learn a new school routine. Also, they are trying to understand and fit in a new culture, which is a very hard and complex issue for most newcomers. In addition, according to Zehler (1994), many of these ELLs need to work to help their families or at least take care of their younger siblings so that their parents would be able to work and support the family.

Secondary school ELLs are especially under more stress as they have only 4 years to learn English, master academic content and pass mandated high-stakes state tests in English, or they will not be able to graduate. In my opinion, ELLs are not only required

to do “double the work” of their native English-speaking peers as Short & Fitzsimmons (2007) suggest, they are asked to be superheroes and achieve under so much stress what many of us cannot even tolerate.

ELLs are also diverse in their economic backgrounds. As immigrants, many have financial difficulties. Almost two-thirds come from low-income families (NCELA, 2007). ELLs’ parents may work long hours and cannot help with homework. Other times, ELLs may be required to babysit their younger siblings until late at night which makes it difficult for them to complete assigned homework (Zehler, 1994). At the same time, most parents are unable to help their children for different reasons. Most of the parents do not speak English, are not familiar with the U.S. school system, or unaware of the program choices available for their kids (Waterman & Harry, 2008). Even when the schools hold meetings to discuss students’ progress or problems with the parents, most of the times, the meetings are held during parents’ work hours and so many of them cannot even attend. Many ELLs’ parents care and try hard to push their kids to achieve to their full potential, but they feel they cannot do much to help their kids. They are not able to communicate with the school due to language barriers and work schedule and so are not involved in their children’s education. Furthermore, there are not many advocates for ELLs, people who are willing to speak on their behalf and really help.

Most ELLs live a tough life as most belong to low-socioeconomic class (NCELA, 2007). Still, they are doing the best they can to build a better future for themselves although they know that certain doors may be closed in their face because of their language and immigration status. The above discussion shows that ELLs are faced with several challenges. Although they are still developing their academic English skills and

content area knowledge, under NCLB they are required to take the same high-stakes assessments as their native English-speaking peers. This study tries to examine the challenges ELLs face when taking high-stakes state tests as well as the impact of these tests on them. Furthermore, the study investigates whether the assessment policies and practices used with ELLs move us closer to or further from, the goal of ensuring equal opportunity for ELLs.

For the purpose of this study, the term ELLs is used to refer to high school students enrolled in ESL/bilingual programs and who are required to pass the same high-stakes statewide tests taken by native English-speaking students for high school graduation.

Legal Issues Related to English Language Learners

This section discusses the Supreme Court cases as well as Federal law cases that had important implications for the education of ELLs. In these cases, influential decisions have been made to protect ELLs' rights.

Meyer v. Nebraska (1923)

In 1923, the case *Meyer v. Nebraska* 262 U.S. 390 (1923), went to U.S. Supreme Court to reverse the, 1919, Nebraska Siman Act, which made it illegal for any school, public or private, to "teach any subject to any person in any language other than the English language." A great victory for ELLs' parents and communities was when the Supreme Court ruled that the state's legislation was in violation of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and disregarded the state's role (107 Neb. 657, 1922, reversed). The court ruled that while state governments can legislate the language used for instruction in schools, states might not pass laws that attempt to prevent communities

from providing private language classes outside of the regular school system. The Supreme Court decision gave the right to communities to teach their native languages to their children.

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954)

In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), was another historic U.S. Supreme Court decision that overruled the 1896 decision in the court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), which permitted the “separate but equal” principle. *Brown v. Board of Education* court decision declared the segregation of African American and White students to be unconstitutional. The decision restated equal protection under the law mandated by the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. It established the principle of same not being equal and called for equal educational opportunity for all students. Later on, this principle was used to address issues facing ELLs (De Jong, 2011).

Lau v. Nichols (1974)

Lau v. Nichols, 414 U.S. 563 (1974) is one of the most famous cases that resulted in one of the most significant court decisions affecting the education of ELLs. The case was filed by the parents of Chinese children in San Francisco against the school district. They claimed that the children were placed in mainstream classrooms where the academic instruction was being provided in English despite their lack of proficiency in English, hence, depriving them of equal education opportunity. On the other hand, the district argued that it had done nothing wrong, and that the Chinese students were receiving treatment equal to that of other students. In 1974, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed that the district violated the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as same education does

not constitute equal education under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Supreme Court ruled:

There is no equality of treatment by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers and curriculum, for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education. Basic English skills are at the very core of what public schools teach. Imposition of a requirement that, before a child can effectively participate in the educational program, he must already have acquired those basic skills is to make a mockery of public education. We know that those who do not understand English are certain to find their classroom experiences wholly incomprehensible and in no way meaningful. (*Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563, 1974)

The Supreme Court decision refuted the dominant belief that sameness means equal.

1975 Lau remedies. After the 1974 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Lau v. Nichols*, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR) established some basic guidelines for schools with ELLs known as the Lau Remedies in 1975. No longer would ELLs be left to sink or swim. The Lau Remedies mainly required school districts to take positive steps to overcome educational barriers faced by ELLs. However, a closer look at these remedies shows that it lacks the 'how' factor and so since there was not a clear guide, it was left all to school districts to do as they pleased. Lyons (1995) explains further the steps required of the schools:

The Lau Remedies specified proper approaches, methods and procedures for (1) identifying and evaluating national-origin-minority students' English-language skills; (2) determining appropriate instructional treatments; (3) deciding when

LEP students were ready for mainstream classes; and (4) determining the professional standards to be met by teachers of language-minority children.

Under the *Lau Remedies*, elementary schools were generally required to provide LEP students special English-as-a-second-language instruction as well as academic subject-matter instruction through the students' strongest language until the student achieved proficiency in English sufficient to learn effectively in a monolingual English classroom. (pp. 4-5)

School districts were required to develop and submit to OCR compliance plans if they were found to be noncompliant with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and if they had 20 or more students of the same language group who have a home language other than English (De Jong, 2011).

Aspira v. New York (1975)

Puerto Rican parents and children in New York City took legal action and filed a federal lawsuit in 1972, against the New York Board of Education in the case known as *Aspira of New York, Inc. v. New York Board of Education*, Consent Decree, 72 Cir. 4002. They claimed that New York City's public schools were not fulfilling their duty to educate the Spanish ELLs. *Aspira v. New York* (1975) resulted in the Aspira Consent Decree, which established the right for New York City's public school Spanish ELLs to receive bilingual education. The consent decree required that the city's public schools provide core content instruction in Spanish for Spanish ELLs whose language deficiency prevents them from participating in the learning process and who can more effectively participate in Spanish. At the same time, students have to be provided with intensive English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction (Lyons, 1995).

Castañeda v. Pickard (1981)

This case is believed to be the most significant court case regarding the education of ELLs after *Lau v. Nichols* (1974). The plaintiffs claimed that the Raymondville, Texas Independent School District failed to address the needs of ELLs as mandated by the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (EEOA) of 1974.

In 1981, in response to the plaintiff's claim, the 5th Circuit Court established a three-pronged test to determine if a school district's language program addresses the needs of ELLs as required by the EEOA. *The Castañeda standard* requires that programs for ELLs must:

- Base their program on educational theory recognized as sound or considered to be a legitimate experimental strategy;
- Implement the program with resources and personnel necessary to put the theory into practice; and
- Evaluate programs and make adjustments where necessary to ensure that adequate progress is being made. [648 F. 2d 989 (5th Circuit, 1981)].

The Castañeda standard is used by several auditing agencies and in lawsuits regarding the education of ELLs. Thus, the Castañeda standard, which was formulated to ensure that schools do something to meet the needs of ELLs, has become a standard in determining the adequacy of programs for ELLs.

Summary

In the above-discussed Supreme Court and Federal Law cases, important decisions have been made to protect the rights of ELLs. The Supreme Court decision in the case *Meyer v. Nebraska* gave the right to communities to teach their native languages

to their children. Moreover, the court decisions in *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Lau v. Nichols* established the principle of same not being equal and called for equal educational opportunity for all students. These court decisions have significant implications in the assessment process for ELLs.

In *Lau v. Nichols*, the Supreme Court ruled “There is no equality of treatment by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers and curriculum, for students who do not understand English.” However, nowadays, ELLs who have not yet developed their English language proficiency to a level that allows them to take high-stakes statewide assessments, are mandated to take the same state tests as their native-English speaking peers which clearly violates the principle of same not being equal. My opinion is that if ELLs were required to take the same high-stakes assessments as native English-speaking students during the time of this court case, *Lau v. Nichols*, the court would have added the word “assessment” to its ‘no equality of treatment’ list. Perhaps only then we would have had a test specifically developed for ELLs.

Additionally, the Lau Remedies mainly require school districts to take positive steps to overcome educational barriers faced by ELLs. Nevertheless, high-stakes assessment is a huge educational barrier faced by ELLs and has been overlooked by policymakers. The case *Castañeda v. Pickard* (1981) resulted in the Castañeda standard, which was prepared to ensure that schools do something to meet the needs of ELLs; however, the case did not produce significant steps to follow. Yet, it has become a standard in determining the adequacy of programs for ELLs. It seems, however, that the assessment of ELLs has not been seen as an important program component. The above mentioned court decisions have given rights to ELLs, however, practically these rights

have not been fully implemented by policymakers.

Standards-based Reform and English Language Learners

Standards have been one of the hottest topics in education reform. The standards-based reform is a national education reform movement in the U.S. The main goal of this reform movement was to push schools to improve student learning (Delandshere & Arens, 2001). The increasing emphasis on standards was driven by several important reports and legislations, including *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (Kraft, 2001), and the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) in 2001. The famous report *A Nation at Risk*, published in 1983, is considered by many as the generator of the modern standards movement. It is considered the most important U.S. education reform document of the twentieth century. *A Nation at Risk* declared public education in the U.S. a failure and called for reform of the American education system (Bullough, Clark, & Patterson, 2003). The report uncovered and condemned the state of the American public school system,

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have even squandered the gains in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge. Moreover, we have dismantled essential support systems which helped make those gains possible. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983)

Education reform initiatives have resulted in a move toward standards-based

education whereby schools, districts, and states are required to align curriculum, instruction, and assessment with student achievement standards (Loeb, Knapp & Elfers, 2008). The standards movement that began in 1989 at the National Governor's Association summit on education in Charlottesville, Virginia, resulted in an agreement on the need for national education goals. Shortly after the summit, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) released its mathematics standards document in 1989, and then federal legislation required a movement among other professional associations to develop standards for other content areas (Marzano & Kendall, 1997).

Thus, standards for content areas such as science, history, English language arts, civics, and geography were released. The intent was to promote high expectations for student learning and to use the national standards as guidelines for state and local curriculum and assessment design and for professional teacher development. Thus, the focus of reform has become high academic standards; identifying what children should learn and then testing students' abilities to meet these standards. Those goals offered opportunities for improving the education of ELLs. In the past, ESL instruction in the U.S. had been unsystematic and varied from district to district and from state to state (Echevarria, Powers, & Shorts, 2006). TESOL officials recognized that the national standards issued for content areas were not taking the needs of ELLs into account. According to Short (2000), ELLs have been disregarded in the standards reform movement. It became obvious that ELLs' academic needs were not being reflected in the other content standards and also teachers were not offered guidance on how to teach a content standard to ELLs.

During this same period, demographic changes in U.S. schools were requiring that

more, not less, attention be paid to the marginalized population of ELLs. Accordingly, with the number of ELLs on the rise around the country, it was becoming clearer that content standards addressing the academic needs of ELLs should be developed. As a result, TESOL standards were developed to balance the discipline-specific standards created by other professional organizations as well as to make sure teachers are equipped to handle ELLs' needs (Beckett & Haley, 2000). The ESL standards acknowledge the important role of language in the achievement of content and highlight instructional and assessment needs of learners who are still developing proficiency in English.

The publication of the *ESL Standards for Pre-K–12 Students* was a milestone in the history of the ESL profession. By March 1996, a draft of the *ESL Standards for Pre-K–12 Students* was ready. The final standards document was published in 1997. Finally, there was a document published by a national professional organization for teachers of English that defined what effective education for ELLs should look like (Short, 2000). With the development of the ESL standards, the historically marginalized but fastest growing group of ELLs was brought closer to the educational mainstream by national standards that set high expectations for these students' academic achievement.

In 2004, World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) created and adopted its English Language Proficiency (ELP) standards that addressed the need for students to become fully proficient in both social and academic English. The WIDA standards, with its model performance indicators which represent social, instructional and academic language, have been declared by TESOL as the national model (Gottlieb, Cranley & Camilleri, 2007).

The WIDA standards addressed both social contexts associated with language

acquisition and academic contexts related to schooling, and particularly to standards, curriculum and instruction. The WIDA standards offered not only a guide for instruction in the academic domains but also sample indicators of progress to inform evaluation at varying levels of English language proficiency within these four academic domains. That is, WIDA ELP Standards have been designed to guide the development of test blueprints. WIDA is thus viewed as the first step in the construction of reliable and valid assessment tools for ELLs. The federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) mandates that states administer a standards-based English language proficiency test annually to all ELLs in kindergarten through grade twelve (Echevarria, Powers, & Shorts, 2006).

There are five WIDA English Language Proficiency (ELP) Standards, which appear in two frameworks: Summative and Formative. The two frameworks can be used for planning curriculum, instruction and assessment of ELLs. The common elements of the two frameworks are the 1) ELP standards, 2) language domains, 3) grade level clusters and 4) language proficiency levels. Performance definitions describe each level of language proficiency (Gottlieb, Cranley & Cammilleri, 2007).

The WIDA standards may be seen as a guide for planning instruction, for without it many teachers might miss on ways of educating ELLs. Although there are many practices that seem to work well for all students regardless of their native language background, there are important issues that should be considered when planning to meet the needs of ELLs. The WIDA standards offer a guide that teachers may use as they look for ways to develop the fluency of their ELLs.

Standards are only as effective as the people who implement them. However, this implementation process has put extra workload on teachers. Standards-based teaching

requires teachers to define what students should know and be able to do and understand how to teach it. This required many teachers to change in the ways they have been teaching for years.

It is clear from the above discussion that professional organizations have realized that the national standards issued for content areas disregarded the needs of ELLs and so they carried this responsibility and were successful in developing standards that took the needs of ELLs into account. Similarly, we would like to see these professional organizations, such as Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), National Association of Bilingual Education, (NABE) and others, work together to encourage the federal government to make changes in the assessment system for ELLs in a way that would ensure students' educational needs are being accounted for.

Social Justice Theory

Social justice strives to free people from oppression. John Rawls who is considered one of the most important social justice theorists in the second half of the twentieth century, and who is known for his theory of justice as fairness (1971), views justice from the standpoint that persons are free and equal. According to Rawls, social justice is about ensuring the protection of equal access to liberties, rights, and opportunities, as well as taking care of the least advantaged members of society.

Rawls (1971) proposed "to give more attention to those with fewer native assets and to those born into the less favorable social positions," "to bias contingencies in the direction of equality" and "to equalize people's life chances" (p.100). Therefore, to find if something is just or unjust, we need to find whether it enhances or hinders equality of access to civil liberties, human rights, and opportunities for healthy and rewarding lives.

Moreover, it also depends whether it distributes a fair share of benefits to the least advantaged members of society (Richardson, 2005).

Rawls' notion of social justice is based on the idea of a social contract, where people freely agree to follow certain rules for the benefit of everyone. These rules, "specify the basic rights and duties to be assigned by the main political and social institutions, and they regulate the division of benefits arising from social cooperation and allot the burdens necessary to sustain it" (Rawls, 2004, p.15). He argued that justice must protect the rights of individual persons while at the same time enabling equality of opportunity and providing a minimum of protection to the poor and marginalized (Rawls, 2004). In Rawls' view, justice is measured by the equal distribution of rights and responsibilities, of economic opportunities, and of social conditions in the various sectors of society. These social goods should be distributed equally unless it is in benefit of the whole society to be distributed unequally. However, distribution should be of greatest benefit to the least advantaged (Rawls, 2004).

To David Miller, another prominent theorist known for *Principles of Social Justice*, social justice deals with the distribution of advantages and disadvantages in society, and with how these things should be distributed within society. Furthermore, social justice deals with the ways that resources are distributed to people by social institutions (Miller, 1991). Whether something is just or unjust thus depends on whether advantages and disadvantages are distributed appropriately in society. Miller explains that when we attack some policy as being socially unjust, in such a case, we are claiming that a person or a group of persons, have fewer advantages than they should have or in other words, tolerate more of the burdens than they should bear, given how other

members of this society are privileged (Miller, 1991).

Johnson (2000) states, “privilege exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they’ve done or failed to do” (p. 16). The message that is communicated by the majority group is that anyone can work hard and succeed, but for the marginalized there are obstacles that privileged communities do not acknowledge. Also not many opportunities are available for the marginalized groups.

This study uses the lens of social justice theory to examine whether the educational policies represented by the assessment practices used, move us closer to or further from, the goal of ensuring equal opportunity for ELLs. The study focuses on the need to provide equitable education for all students in our schools.

Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002) see the goal of social justice as “the exercise of altering those arrangements (institutional and organizational power arrangements) by actually engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational and personal dimensions, among other forms of relationships” (p. 162).

Social justice in education believes that injustice and a variety of inequalities have been persistent in schools and society (Boyles, Carusi, & Attick, 2009). Students of color, socioeconomically marginalized groups, and language minority groups are the most affected by these inequalities. Bell (2007) defines social justice as both a process and a goal, he points out that,

The goal of social justice education is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a

vision of society that is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. (p. 1)

Consistent with this view, Hackman (2005) explains that social justice education pays careful attention to the systems of power that give rise to social inequality, and encourages students to examine oppression on institutional levels in search of opportunities for social action.

According to Cochran-Smith (2004 cited in Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2009), “working for social justice in education means guiding students in critical self-reflection of their socialization into this matrix of unequal relationships and its implications, analysis of the mechanisms of oppression, and the ability to challenge these hierarchies” (p. 350). A social justice framework is a way of resisting unfairness and inequity while at the same time increasing possibility for all. It pays attention to how people, policies, practices, curricula, and schools may be used to free instead of oppress those least served.

Therefore, if students are not shown that they are capable learners, regardless of a perceived social stigma, then they will start to believe it. This ignorant way of looking at differences and the power of a strong, socially constructed norm means being poor or being labeled a disabled person starts to define who people are as individuals. Johnson (2000) states that, “reducing people to a single dimension of who they are separates and excludes them, marks them as “other,” as different from “normal” people and therefore as inferior” (p.15).

Adams (2010 cited in Ndimande, 2013) clarifies that social justice education advocates want stakeholders to give special attention to the inequalities in curriculum and classroom practice. He explains that social justice education,

calls into question the relations of power and privilege, pays careful attention to the inequalities experienced by disadvantaged and marginalized social identity groups... and identifies recurrent and continuing patterns of disadvantage experienced by people of color and peoples identified as immigrants or the children of immigrants. (p. 60)

It is important that schools provide equal educational opportunities for all students, including the marginalized growing group of ELLs. Social justice education seeks to stop any form of discrimination and inequalities in schools. The goal of social justice in education is to address issues of social inequalities within school reform to help provide an educational context that addresses students' educational needs for school success (Hackman, 2005; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2009).

Unfortunately, some theories of justice and scholars tend to reduce social justice to distribution of benefits and burdens among society's members. However, the decision in the case of *Lau v. Nichols* refuted the prevailing belief that equality means sameness. That is, equal distribution of resources does not ensure equal education. Therefore, equity is not the same as equality, as considering them the same would ignore the fact that different students need different resources and experiences to be successful (Gutiérrez, 2002). According to Lipman (2004), equity is defined as "equitable distribution of material and human resources, intellectually challenging curriculum, educational experiences that build on students' cultures, languages, home experiences, and identities; and pedagogies that prepare students to engage in critical thought and democratic society" (p. 3).

This study uses social justice theory as a theoretical framework to examine

whether the assessment policies and practices used, validates or violates the principle of equality of educational opportunity in education and thus help perpetuate the educational inequities and achievement gaps instead of overcoming them. An examination of educational policies, in this case- assessment, may show that the implementation of such legislations may exclude the student population that it intends to help.

ELLs and Accountability Issues

The discussion of accountability and assessment is unavoidable in the field of education today. Accountability is not a new idea in the field of education. Taxpayers, parents and other stakeholders view accountability as a tool to determine if instruction has had its intended effect (Wiliam, 2010).

No other federal policy can compare to the impact that the historic and most famous legislation, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, had on states, districts, and schools. NCLB was signed by President Bush in 2001; it is a reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act. NCLB brought assessment and accountability to the forefront in education reform. With NCLB, the federal government demanded accountability for all students and teachers. NCLB mandated that all students be afforded an equitable education. The four basic principles of NCLB (2002) included (a) stronger accountability for results; (b) greater flexibility for states, school districts, and schools; (c) expanded choices for parents; and (d) focusing on proven educational methods.

NCLB mandated equitable education for ELLs to include monitoring student English language acquisition progress and ELL progress on state mandated tests. Under NCLB, ELLs were being held to the same standards and accountability as their native

English-speaking peers. NCLB held the states, districts and schools accountable for student academic achievement and assessment through adequate yearly progress (AYP) reporting:

No Child Left Behind requires each state to define adequate yearly progress for school districts and schools, within the parameters set by Title I. In defining adequate yearly progress, each state sets the minimum levels of improvement--measurable in terms of student performance--that school districts and schools must achieve within time frames specified in the law ... Subsequent thresholds must be raised at least once every three years, until, at the end of 12 years, all students in the state are achieving at the proficient level on state assessments in reading/language arts and math. (U.S. Department of Education, 2003, p.8)

The school was accountable for reporting the AYP of each subgroup category of students, including ELLs. It had to report proficiency levels of student achievement in math, science, and language arts. If a school failed to make AYP for two consecutive years, it was designated as needing improvement. Schools were held accountable for student achievement regardless of students' educational backgrounds or language abilities.

Under NCLB, to receive Title III funding, which was designated for ELL programs, states, districts and schools were required to increase the English proficiency and core academic content knowledge of ELLs. That is, under NCLB, schools, districts, and states were required to demonstrate that ELLs were making progress not only in meeting academic standards but also in becoming fully proficient in English. It was up to the school districts to choose the method of instruction to be used to teach English to ELLs.

All ELLs' English language proficiency must be tested at least once a year. Also, all ELLs had to take state academic tests in English. As a result, NCLB was considered by some as a federal policy that had a monolingual approach to education, that is all the state assessments had to be given only in English (Menken, 2006); regardless of students' language proficiency levels. Political leaders were looking for a way to ensure an increase in student achievement, and NCLB was believed to be the cure for all education problems. Policymakers expected educators to do what many believed was unrealistic - bring every student, including ELLs, to achieve proficient levels in language arts and mathematics by 2014.

Consequently, schools needed to work hard to provide high quality education to ELLs to try to close the achievement gap between ELLs and their native English-speaking peers. Schools were under much stress to do this not only for the students' benefit but mainly to make the AYP. However, schools were not always successful as is clear from the results of the study done by Burke, DePalma, Ginther, Morita-Mullaney, & Young (2014) where they analyzed statewide student performance data and AYP reports from Indiana schools and school districts between 2002 and 2011. Results indicated that Indiana schools serving large emergent ELL population were more likely to also serve low socioeconomic students and less likely to make AYP.

Race to the Top

Race to the Top (RTTT) is the largest competitive grant program in the history of education in the U.S. (Nicholson-Crotty & Staley, 2012). It is Obama administration's \$4.35 billion education initiative encouraging states to compete for grant money to use towards education reform. It offers incentives to states willing to accelerate systemic reform to improve teaching and learning in U.S. public schools.

RTTT has pushed states to ensure college and career readiness by implementing more uniform college and career oriented standards, developing data systems for measuring student progress, teacher effectiveness, and improvement of failing schools. This grant program also encouraged states to adopt the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). As of 2015, 42 states adopted the CCSS (CCSS Initiative, 2016). The millions that the grant program promised tempted many states to take up the challenge and align their education reforms with the values of RTTT and New Jersey was no exception. Consequently, the CCSS were implemented in schools.

The CCSS needed assessments aligned to it. So, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) received federal grants to develop new CCSS-aligned assessments (Nicholson-Crotty & Staley, 2012). CCSS assessments were implemented in 2014-2015. However, the U.S. Department of Education (2013) in its report criticized PARCC for failure to focus on ELLs. Surprisingly, PARCC then outlined testing supports for ELLs, using the same accommodations as NCLB. As CCSS assessments are being implemented in U.S. schools, it seems that no major changes regarding the assessment of ELLs have been proposed. Thus, setting U.S. education policy to repeat the same mistakes made under NCLB (Menken, Hudson, & Leung, 2014).

In 2012, New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) filed an application requesting waivers from the NCLB requirements. NCLB has been under fire by the NJDOE. In its application for waiver, the NJDOE (2012b) argued that,

NCLB's limitations are also numerous and widely known. It fails to give schools credit for making progress with students. It over-identifies schools and districts

as underperforming. It treats a school struggling with a single subgroup the same as a school that is comprehensively failing its student body. It requires an inflexible set of interventions that are inappropriate for many targeted schools. Finally, its supports and sanctions haven't led to the improvements our students need. (pp.17-18)

NJDOE believes that its main goal is to make sure that all students in New Jersey graduate from high school ready for college and career. However, the department felt that it was far from accomplishing this mission. NJDOE supported its claim by reporting that on the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam, in 8th grade reading, New Jersey ranked 50 out of 51 States in the achievement gap between low and high-income students. Moreover, over 40 percent of third graders in New Jersey were not reading on grade level and approximately 90 percent of students entering community colleges in NJ required remediation (NJDOE, 2012b).

Based on the above-discussed reasons, NJDOE requested waivers from the NCLB requirements and applied for RTTT funds. NJDOE claimed that it has a new vision of accountability. In its new accountability reform process, NJDOE stated it will abandon New Jersey State Standards in favor of the Core Curriculum State Standards (CCSS). The Department mentioned that it would review all state assessment items to align it to CCSS instead of New Jersey State Standards. The state believed that this transition would help teachers and students meet the more rigorous expectations of the CCSS.

NJDOE also implemented Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments to ensure that New Jersey moves to more rigorous standards and assessments. The state started by implementing college- and career-ready

standards statewide in reading/language arts and mathematics for all students and schools. NJDOE started implementing PARCC assessments in 2014-2015 (NJDOE, 2012b).

Furthermore, NJDOE adopted English language proficiency standards that are aligned to the NJ's college and career ready standards and which reflect the academic language skills required to meet the new college and career ready standards.

Assessments were administered statewide; included all students, and ELLs were provided the same accommodations provided under NCLB. Concerning high school, during this transition, NJDOE would review the state's high school assessment system.

Furthermore, NJDOE would adopt challenging end-of course and end-of-year exams.

NJDOE believes that these transitions would help prepare the state for the transition to PARCC's more rigorous assessments.

In New Jersey's new accountability reform process, schools are not categorized based on the AYP but are classified as "most persistently underperforming schools (Priority), those with troubling achievement gaps (Focus), and those achieving remarkable results (reward)." The school report card looks different for a high school, four performance areas are presented, each with a subsection in the performance report: "academic achievement, college and career readiness, graduation rate and post-secondary outcomes, and progress toward closing achievement gaps" (NJDOE, 2012b).

Critics described RTTT as a flawed program that centralizes education authority at the federal level, and so restricting the flexibility of states; while others accused the RTTT program of being unscientific and not research based (Mathis, 2011; Onosco, 2011). On the other hand, proponents of RTTT commended its focus on teacher quality

and improving outcomes for all students (Walsh & Jacobs, 2009). In addition to a large amount of grant money, one of the major benefits of a winning RTTT application was that state departments of education were able to opt out of AYP requirements and sanctions.

It seems that the federal government has succeeded in influencing state decision-making, but what is really concerning is the speed at which these changes are being implemented. It raises many questions regarding the research-base as well as the validity of the standards and assessments that have been developed and embraced by several states in a very short period of time and if all of this was done just because of the millions that were offered. Moreover, is there proof that these changes differ or are really better than the ones being used before and how do we know that these new changes are the best for all of our students, including ELLs?

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

On December 10, 2015 President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law replacing the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). ESSA is a reauthorization and the most recent version of the federal government's K-12 law, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which came into effect in 1965. ESSA requires data on student achievement and graduation rates to be reported as well as action in response to that data. However, unlike NCLB, states, districts, and schools will determine what support and interventions are implemented. Although the act has returned some control to the states regarding standards and teacher evaluation, scholars as Au and Hollar (2016) propose that, through ESSA, "the federal government has reaffirmed its commitment to annual high-stakes standardized testing and accountability

measures, and to linking those scores to school funding” (p. 36). Thus, it seems that the U.S. education reform system is going on the same policy path.

It is clear from the above discussion that every few years we have a pop-up new education legislation that is marketed as a cure pill and remedy to all of our education problems and then after some years is shunned aside as a failure that has halted education reform. This is what Nolan (2016) describes as “the messiness of the lived experience of reform” (p.20). Whether we agree or disagree with the new changes, it is evident that New Jersey is already moving towards more high-stakes test. It is hoped that this study would help identify the problems that ELLs face with high-stakes state tests so that it would be improved in the future. Also, the study identifies the most appropriate and helpful testing accommodations for ELLs in an effort that it would be provided to students in the new accountability reform process.

High-Stakes Testing

At the center of the standards and accountability reform approach to education is high-stakes testing as the only means of assessment. According to Sheperd (2016) the period from 1970 to the present day, is characterized by a dramatic decline in ability testing and a steep rise in use of standardized achievement tests to hold students and schools accountable. Altshuler and Schmautz (2006) define high-stakes tests as “mandated tests, the results of which are automatically used to make inferences, decisions, or characterizations about students or the systems by which they are educated” (p. 6). In other words, they are tests with major consequences for all involved, including students, teachers and schools.

NCLB contained requirements of each state to administer a state assessment that measures the degree to which students meet the standards the state implemented. The assessment is used to determine whether students, including ELLs, were performing at a proficiency level established by the state (Duran, 2005). Wiliam (2010) suggested that standardized tests are “inappropriate tools...to hold districts, schools, and teachers accountable.” In Shepard’s (2016) view, the large-scale assessment “has been the cause of two great harms: the sorting of students who then received diminished opportunities and the cheapening of academic learning because of the constraints of standardized test formats” (p.119). Scholars who also debated against high-stakes testing argued that other countries throughout the world rely less on the use of standardized assessment and have higher rates of achievement (Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2010).

ELLs are required to take state tests in academic content subjects in English. Studies have shown that academic achievement tests that are constructed to evaluate native English-speaking students’ content knowledge have lower reliability and validity for the ELL population (Abedi, 2002, 2004). Coltrane (2002) pointed out that “as beneficial as it may be to include ELLs in high-stakes tests, some complications arise concerning the validity and reliability of such tests for this group of learners” (p.2), because it is unclear whether we are testing ELLs’ English language proficiency or their content knowledge. The American Educational Research Association (1985) suggested that, “for a non-native English speaker and for a speaker of some dialects of English, every test given in English becomes, in part, a language or literacy test” (Standards for educational and psychological testing, 1985, p.73). Similarly, August, Hakuta, & Pompa (1994) explained,

Current assessment instruments in English are inappropriate because they actually assess both content concepts and language ability, particularly reading comprehension and writing. The interconnection of language and content makes it difficult to isolate one feature from the other. As a result, it is difficult to know whether a student is unable to demonstrate knowledge because of a language barrier or whether the student does not know the content material being tested. (p. 9)

That is any test given in English to an ELL student who is still in the process of learning the new language, tests the student's proficiency level in English regardless of the content of the test (Abedi et al., 2003, 2004; Menken, 2006). Moreover, research has shown that it takes 5-7 years to attain academic language (Thomas & Collier, 1997). However, state and federal policies penalize schools whose student groups do not meet certain test performance standards. Although many of the ELLs who are required to take these high-stakes tests have been in the country for few weeks or months.

In a study conducted by Platt et al. (2003 cited in Reeves, 2006), the researchers found out that several administrators were concerned about pressure from the state level to produce good test scores within a limited time frame. They felt that unrealistic expectations were being placed on teachers and students. Many administrators said it was unrealistic to expect ELLs to make the AYP and reach the proficient level given the state's failure to develop alternative assessments. They believed that more time is needed to develop academic language proficiency (Platt et al., 2003 cited in Reeves, 2006).

Data from the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) and the National Assessment of Educational Progress

(NAEP) (cited in Abedi and Dietel, 2004) show that ELLs constantly scored lower on assessments than native English-speaking students. In some states the gap between the performance of native-English speaking students and ELLs ranged from 5 to 60 points.

Menken (Menken, Hudson, & Leung, 2014) analyzed the passing rates of ELLs in each state on reading and math tests which were reported to the federal government for accountability under NCLB. Menken then used these to calculate national passing rates and compare data for ELLs to their native English-speaking peers. The data showed that on average ELLs score approximately 46 percent below on high school reading tests and 31 percent below in high school mathematics tests. Menken emphasized that this data reveals the inadequacy of the used accommodations. She concluded that this data does not mean that ELLs are “failing to acquire English or academic content but rather reinforces that these students are in fact language learners” (Menken, Hudson, & Leung, 2014, p.605).

In their quantitative study, Abella, Urrutia, and Shneyderman (2005) examined whether or not achievement tests that are administered in English only were an accurate measure of bilingual student mathematics knowledge. The researchers studied students from 36 schools in Florida. The results of the study showed that ELLs’ overall performance on the achievement tests that were given in English only, was not a valid measure of their content knowledge.

High-stakes testing has a great impact on students and schools because of the dominant belief that academic success is measured through the student performance or in other words the test scores. No matter what ELLs’ previous academic performance, evaluations, attendance have been, if ELLs do not pass the mandated high-stakes tests,

they will not be allowed to graduate. The problem is that many ELLs perform poorly on these tests and so have a difficult time meeting standards on high-stakes tests. Not passing these high-stakes tests may have detrimental consequences for ELLs, such as grade retention or no high school diploma/graduation. As a result, there are significant gaps between the pass rates of ELLs and overall pass rate (CEP, 2006, Menken, Hudson, & Leung, 2014). It was reported in 2001 that ELLs had dropout rates up to four times that of their native English-speaking peers (McKeon, 2005). Therefore, when learning is solely defined by the scores on high-stakes tests, students most at risk of academic failure tend to suffer. Certainly, all these tests and accountability issues put much stress on the ELLs who already have to deal with many other challenges.

Based on the aforementioned practices, this study examines, through the lens of the social justice theory, whether the assessment practices employed address the educational needs of ELLs. The study investigates if the assessments used can be considered a true reflection of ELLs' knowledge of academic content areas and so ensure equal opportunity for ELLs.

Tests in New Jersey

NCLB contained requirements of each state to administer a state assessment that measures the degree to which students meet the standards the state implemented. The assessment is used to determine whether students, including ELLs, were performing at a proficiency level established by the state. ELLs in New Jersey were required to take these state tests, the High School Proficiency Assessment or the Alternative High School Assessment, in English. Students, including ELLs, are required to pass high-stakes state tests in order to receive a high school diploma.

HSPA

The High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) was the used statewide test taken by all public school eleventh graders throughout New Jersey. New Jersey administered the HSPA for Grade 11 to comply with state testing requirements. It was a high-stakes graduation requirement that was used to determine student achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics as specified in the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards (NJDOE, 2013).

The highest score attainable was a 300 for each section. For both mathematics and Language Arts Literacy, students were categorized under three classifications based on their scores: Partially Proficient (<200), Proficient (200-250), and Advanced Proficient (250-300). Students who scored at the Partially Proficient level were considered to be below the state minimum proficiency. First-time eleventh grade students who failed the HSPA in March of their junior year had an opportunity to retake it in October and March of their senior year (NJDOE, 2005, 2011).

All ELLs, regardless of their English proficiency level and the period they have been in the country, must meet the same graduation requirements as native English-speaking students. ELLs who scored below 200 in any of the HSPA content areas were able to participate in the Alternative High School Assessment (AHSA) process if they were expected to complete all state and local graduation requirements (for a June or summer graduation) when they reach twelfth-grade (NJDOE, 2012a).

AHSA

The Alternative High School Assessment (AHSA) was used to measure high school competency of the Core Curriculum Content Standards in Mathematics and

Language Arts Literacy. It offered an alternative way of meeting the state graduation proficiency test requirement. The AHSA was aligned to the HSPA test specifications to make sure that students who showed proficiency through the AHSA had demonstrated the same performance levels as students who were proficient on the HSPA. To be eligible for the AHSA, students must meet all high school graduation requirements except for passing HSPA Mathematics and/or Language Arts Literacy. The AHSA consisted of untimed open-ended performance assessment tasks (PATs) administered locally and scored under standardized conditions by the state testing vendor (NJDOE, 2012a).

If an ELL student took the AHSA in English and responded in English, the only allowed accommodations were translations of the test directions, the use of the bilingual translation dictionaries and a separate testing room since AHSA is untimed. ELLs could also take a translated version of the AHSA. To be eligible, the ELL must be enrolled in a language assistance program, entered U.S. school in the ninth grade or later, and have limited English proficiency as determined by a State-approved English language proficiency tests (NJDOE, 2014a).

However, if the ELL took a translated version of the AHSA, the student was also required to take the MAC II test and achieve a score of 530. The MAC II test is an extra requirement for ELLs who test in a language other than English and is required to pass in order to receive New Jersey high school diploma (NJDOE, 2014a). Any student who fulfilled all of the requirements for graduation but failed to pass the HSPA or AHSA would not receive a high school diploma. This student would have the option to continue the AHSA process or return to school to take the HSPA at the time of testing the

following year (NJDOE, 2012a).

ELLs and Testing Accommodations

English language learners face unique linguistic and cultural challenges when taking state assessments in English. Most state assessments have been designed without taking the academic needs of ELLs into consideration. Abedi (2002, 2004) argued that the validity of content assessments for ELLs should be improved through the use of appropriate testing accommodations.

Given that language can serve as a barrier in ELLs' performance, test accommodations are provided to help level the playing field and allow ELLs to better demonstrate their true performance level. The goal of an accommodation is to make an assessment more accessible to ELLs and students with disabilities by reducing or removing the effects of students' level of language proficiency and thus produce results that are valid for these students (Abedi, Courtney & Leon, 2003; Abedi & Ewers, 2013). In other words, accommodations are intended to level the playing field, so that students may provide a clearer picture of what they know and can do especially with regard to content-based assessments, where performance may be affected by their English language proficiency level (Abedi, 2013; Menken, 2006). The intent is not to give those who are permitted to use an accommodation an unfair advantage over those who are not receiving that assessment accommodation.

Accommodations for ELLs involve changes to testing procedures, testing materials, or the testing situation. Accommodations for ELLs provide either direct or indirect linguistic support to minimize the language barrier. Direct linguistic accommodations include glossaries, dictionaries, and read-aloud, while indirect linguistic

accommodations include different methods of administering the test such as individual, small group, separate room, and extended time administration (Forte & Faulkner-Bond, 2010). Indirect linguistic accommodations give ELLs the opportunity to better process the language in the test items, but do not change anything related to the test itself (Abedi & Ewers, 2013; Pennock-Roman & Rivera, 2011).

To respond to the accountability requirements, every state prepared its policies for accommodating ELLs. States have relied on accommodations as one of the main means to increase the validity of ELLs' test scores. Much of the research on accommodations in statewide assessments has focused on students with disabilities, and many state assessment policies have relied on this context when identifying accommodations for ELLs (Abedi, 2013; Kieffer et al, 2009). As a result, several states only allow accommodations that are used for students with disabilities instead of linguistic accommodations (Abedi & Ewers, 2013).

Research documents the most commonly permitted accommodations for ELLs as: extra time, bilingual dictionaries (without definitions), use of oral directions either in English or in a student's native language, simplifying or repeating test directions, extended breaks during testing, and small group testing administration (Abedi & Ewers, 2013; Wolf et al., 2008).

To date there have been a series of studies that have either reviewed or conducted meta-analyses on empirical research involving test accommodations for ELLs (Abedi et al., 2004; Francis et al., 2006; Kieffer et al., 2009; Pennock-Roman and Rivera, 2007; Pennock-Roman & Rivera, 2011; Sireci et al., 2003). Regarding the effectiveness of the

different accommodations used with ELLs, Sireci et al. (2003) in their review found that small gains for ELLs were associated with simplified English and dictionary accommodations. They also reported that research did not show support for the dual-language booklet accommodation. On the other hand, research done by (Abedi, Courtney & Leon, 2003; Abedi et al., 2004) showed support for customized dictionaries and some support for simplified English, finding the accommodations to be effective and valid. The researchers also indicated that native language translation is only effective if students are given instruction in their native language, and that extra time alone has not significantly proved to be an effective accommodation.

Francis et al. (2006), in their meta-analysis, concluded that many of the accommodations had little to no consistent effect, and none was enough to level the playing field for ELLs. Only English language dictionaries had a significant overall positive effect across studies. The use of translated (Spanish) tests and dual language word-to-word dictionaries also were found to be effective in some studies. The researchers advised that dictionaries are appropriate only if students are familiar with how to use them and added that, in order for translated assessments to be of value, students need to have received recent native language instruction in the content tested.

Pennock-Roman and Rivera's (2007) meta-analysis identified six accommodations with positive effects for ELLs at different levels of English language proficiency. Effective direct linguistic support accommodations included pop-up English language dictionaries/glossaries, side-by-side dual language (Spanish-English) tests, and English dictionaries/glossaries. At lower English language proficiency levels and for students who received Spanish instruction in the content assessed, translated (Spanish)

assessments were found to be effective. For students at intermediate levels of English language proficiency who are taught in English, a basic English version of the test was found to be effective. Of the indirect linguistic support accommodations, extended time was the only accommodation that was effective for ELLs. This accommodation was considered at least partially helpful because processing speed in the second language tends to be slower. Extended time was found to be somewhat effective alone, but more effective in combination with a direct linguistic support accommodation such as a dictionary or glossary.

Both Kieffer et al. (2009) and Pennock-Roman and Rivera (2011) conducted meta-analyses to examine the effectiveness and validity of accommodations. Kieffer et al. (2009) examined 11 empirical studies on ELLs' accommodations from 2001 to July 2006. Most of the studies involved students in the 4th or 8th grade taking a mathematics or science assessment, involving questions from either the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) or the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). The most common accommodations examined throughout the literature included simplified English, English dictionary or glossary, and bilingual dictionary or glossary. Results found that in relation to accommodation effectiveness, only the English dictionary and glossary accommodation was found to be statistically significant. This accommodation reduced the achievement gap by 10-25%.

Pennock-Roman and Rivera (2011) expanded the study by Kieffer et al. (2009) by adding additional studies for a total of 14 empirical studies from 1990 to 2007. Of the 14 studies, 10 studies were examined by Kieffer et al. (2009). Pennock-Roman and Rivera (2011) also expanded the study by categorizing effect sizes by accommodation type

together with extended or restricted time, and separating effect sizes for native language accommodations by student English proficiency level and language of instruction.

Results indicated that with restricted time, the only significant positive effect was found with the pop-up English glossary accommodation. For accommodations provided with extended time, the only significant positive effect was found with the English dictionary/glossary accommodation.

For accommodations by English proficiency level, results showed that the most effective accommodation for Spanish speaking students with low English proficiency was Spanish versions of the test. For ELLs at intermediate levels of English proficiency, plain English was the most effective accommodation. Overall, the authors noted that it is important to distinguish accommodations with extra time from those with restricted time. They found that the most adequate accommodations with extra time included dual-language, bilingual glossary, and the English glossary/dictionary, and that the most promising accommodation with restricted time was the pop-up English glossary.

Consequently, Abedi (2004) and Acosta, Rivera and Willner (2008) recommended that state policies offer accommodations that minimize to some degree the linguistic barriers that prevent ELLs from demonstrating the academic knowledge and skills tested. Such accommodations would provide a true picture of ELLs' content knowledge and not only their language proficiency. This in turn would enhance the validity of assessments for ELLs. Without adequate accommodations, ELLs' test scores cannot accurately reflect what students know and can do. Other researchers (August, Hakuta, & Pompa, 1994) suggested the use of alternative assessments such as performance and portfolio assessments, as well as the use of multiple measures, instead of relying on single

measures, as a more accurate way to measure ELLs' academic achievement.

Different students at different English language proficiency levels may have different needs. Appropriate accommodations may allow ELLs to be able to demonstrate their knowledge on the high-stakes state tests. This study tries to examine how helpful the used testing accommodations are for ELLs in an effort to find out the most appropriate testing accommodations for ELLs. Little research exists to guide policy refinements and it is hoped that the results of this study provide a base to help refine ELL assessment practices.

Access to the Curriculum

Addressing the needs of all students is the responsibility of schools. Although ELLs are a heterogeneous group of students, schools are required to find ways to meet their diverse needs. According to Lucas (2001), "schools that successfully address LM [language minority] students' academic needs provide formal means through which LM students can develop abilities in English, abilities in their native languages, and skills and knowledge in different content areas" (p. 9).

Students' access to the curriculum depends mainly on the school attended. Unfortunately, in some schools, ELLs are denied full access to the curriculum. Some schools require ELLs to first gain some proficiency in English before taking any core subject classes. This certainly hinders ELLs' educational progress. ELLs who are denied full access to grade level courses will have a very slim chance of passing the high-stakes state tests.

Programs vary on the range of content coverage offered to ELLs; full content, partial content, or sparse content coverage. Minicucci & Olsen (1992) summed up the

factors that lead to lack of full access of ELLs to the curriculum to include ELLs' complex and diverse needs, lack of effective programming, shortage of trained teachers, assessment practices that provide minimal information about the academic needs of ELLs, the departmental structure of secondary schools, and lack of appropriate curricular materials. They found out that in most of the high schools in their study, ELLs were usually enrolled in elective courses and ESL but math or science might or might not be scheduled. Also, content area classes were not offered in grades 11 and 12 so students in higher grades were limited to only grade 9 or 10 courses. The researchers also reported that three of the schools surveyed did not offer math classes to ELLs through the Sheltered English approach, two schools did not offer science, and two schools did not offer social studies classes. Consequently, in such high schools, graduation opportunities are limited for ELLs who do not have access to the full curriculum.

On the other hand, successful programs for ELLs offer content classes in the student's heritage language so that students may have access to content while they are still learning English. Because of the growing numbers of ELLs who come from different language and cultural backgrounds, it has become difficult for schools to provide all students with content classes in their home languages. Add to this, the shortage of qualified teachers who are well prepared to teach these classes as well as teacher's willingness to participate in staff development to be able to teach ELLs (Minicucci and Olsen, 1992). However, this should not be used as an excuse by schools to keep ELLs in low-level courses. If students have a strong background in a certain subject area, then they should have access to advanced classes.

Research showed that it takes 3 years for students to attain social language fluency and that it takes them 5-7 years to reach academic English proficiency (Thomas & Collier, 1997). Thus, to help ELLs with limited English proficiency to have full access to the curriculum, schools can provide students with content classes in English taught through modified instructional approaches by teachers who are well trained in those approaches. This can offer access to the curriculum for all ELLs and help them reach academic success.

ELLs, who are denied full access to grade level courses, have a very slim chance to pass high-stakes state tests. These schools and districts place ELLs in remediation courses but at the same time hold them accountable to high-stakes state exams which they were not adequately prepared for. Not passing these high-stakes tests may have detrimental consequences for these young learners; such as grade retention and no high school diploma/graduation. This study explores whether ELLs have full access to grade level courses as well as the impact of the high-stakes assessments on ELLs.

Summary

This chapter summarized some of the features regarding policy and practices affecting the education of the ELL population. It discussed the NCLB Act (2001) as an important piece of educational legislation by which all states had to comply with testing and accountability measures. Reviewing literature that relates to past and present educational policies affecting the education of ELLs provides a broad picture of the challenges and complex issues facing ELLs. It raises questions about whether we are providing this growing group of students with just and equitable educational opportunity represented by a valid assessment system. Also if these educational policies, which rely

heavily on high-stakes state assessments, impede or facilitate ELLs' paths towards academic success. The study attempts to answer these questions by examining the challenges of high school ELLs with high-stakes tests, through the voices of the teachers and ELLs, in an effort to identify the most effective assessment practices that would increase student achievement and create equity and excellence in the assessment of ELLs.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents a description of the research methodology that was followed to conduct this research to answer the questions posed for the study. The purpose of the study was to explore the practices, challenges and impact of high-stakes statewide assessments on high school ELLs as expressed by their teachers, and through the perspectives and accounts of ELLs. The study examined the extent to which the assessment practices employed address the educational needs of ELLs. The intent of this study was to listen to high school ELLs together with their teachers in order to try to understand their perspective regarding the assessment policies and practices used with ELLs in order to try to determine best assessment practices that would increase the academic achievement of ELLs and decrease the achievement gap between them and their native English-speaking peers. This mixed-method study was guided by the following questions:

What are the perspectives and experiences of ELLs and their teachers in New Jersey regarding high-stakes state assessments?

Secondary research questions for this study were as follows:

1. Do high-stakes state assessments fairly and accurately measure ELLs' knowledge from the perspectives of teachers and ELLs?
2. What kinds of testing support do ELLs receive before taking high-stakes state assessments?
3. What types of testing accommodations are used during high-stakes state assessments to address ELLs' needs? How helpful are these accommodations?

4. What is the impact of the high-stakes standardized state assessments on the ELLs?
5. What recommendations can be made to improve assessment practices for ELLs?

Summary of the Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted during the 2012 fall semester to determine if there were social injustices in the assessment practices of ELLs and to examine if effective assessment policies and practices that accommodate to the educational needs of ELLs are being used.

Site

The site selected for the pilot study was Deerpark High school, a high school in central New Jersey. The ESL program included four levels; Port of Entry (POE), ESL 1, ESL 2, and ESL 3. Multiple criteria, which included student performance on the English proficiency test (ACCESS), teacher recommendation, number of years the student has been in the country, and student grades in other subjects determine if the ESL student be transferred to a higher ESL level. Teachers may also recommend that a student be retained or skip an ESL level.

Participants

The study relied heavily on human experience and perceptions. Three teacher interviews were held, along with three student interviews. The following descriptions depict the interview participants in detail.

Students. Three students were selected to participate in interviews in order to get snapshots of student perspectives on the challenges and impact of the high-stakes statewide tests on ELLs. The teachers selected the three student participants.

The students involved in this study were Denise, Rosa, and Roberto (all

participant names in this study are pseudonyms, for purposes of confidentiality). All three students were Hispanics. Denise was from the Dominican Republic. She first arrived in the United States a year and a half from the beginning of the interview and was in ESL 3 during the study interview. Rosa was from Peru, she arrived two and a half years from the date of the interview and was in ESL 2. Roberto was from Honduras; he arrived 2 years before the date of the interview and was also in ESL 2. Since the three student interviewees were all ELLs, their verbal responses contained grammatical mistakes, self-corrections, and pauses as they thought about the wording they wanted to use.

Teachers. Perspectives were gained from three teachers, two ESL teachers and one English teacher who also specializes in teaching a HSPA preparation class. The teacher participants involved in this study were Ms. Ortiz, Mrs. Detto, and Mrs. Angelo. Ms. Ortiz was an English language learner herself. She first arrived from the Dominican Republic in the United States when she was 20 years old, started learning English and then decided to become an ESL teacher. Mrs. Detto and Mrs. Angelo were both Caucasian teachers.

Research Questions

The following were the research questions for the pilot study:

1. Do high stakes state assessments fairly and accurately measure ELL students' knowledge from the perspectives of teachers and ELL students?
2. What types of test accommodations are used during high stakes statewide assessments to address ELLs' needs?
3. What is the impact of the high stakes standardized state assessments on the ELL students?

4. What recommendations for best assessment practices can reliably document what ELL learners have learned?

Data Collection

To explore the research questions, data were collected during the 2012 fall semester.

Interviews. The pilot study used interviews as a source of data collection.

Interviews were conducted with the three high school teachers and the three ESL high school students at Deerpark High School in the fall of 2012.

The interviews were used to collect information on the perceptions of teachers and ELLs regarding the challenges and impact of high-stakes standardized tests on ELLs. All interviews were conducted in a one-on-one setting at a location that was determined by the school. The conference room, where the interviews were held, was a very convenient and quiet place and there were no interruptions to the interviews.

Participants completed permission forms prior to participating in the interviews. All the participants were informed of the purpose of the interviews and were assured of the confidentiality and the anonymity of their responses. All interviews were audio-recorded and the researcher took notes on a paper copy of the interview questions. Student participants were given as much time as they needed to formulate their responses and answer the questions. Student participant interviews lasted from 20 to 25 minutes each while teacher interviews ranged from 35 to 55 minutes each.

Data Analysis

Before transcribing, the researcher listened to all of the audio files of the interviews and tried to find connections between the data. Since the researcher conducted the interviews in person, she started the process of listening with preconceived thoughts

about the categories that might be found in the data. Hence, responses were coded by anticipated response categories, adding new categories that emerged. The researcher carefully read the transcripts multiple times and wrote notes in the margins. During this process, the researcher tried to jot down any relationships that she noticed. Coding categories from each participant's data were compared looking at connectedness among the data. The next step was to condense the list and merge codes. Coding categories were combined into larger themes that connect codes.

Findings of the Pilot Study

Participants' responses seemed to question how well high-stakes state tests meet their intended goals of measuring student understanding of the subject and raising standards for student learning. Teachers believed that the HSPA might function well for measuring the academic progress of native English-speaking students; however, it is not an appropriate assessment choice for ELLs as it is specifically designed for native English speakers. Consequently, teachers expressed their concern regarding the use of the statewide tests with ELLs.

Both teachers and students shared their thoughts regarding the mandated high-stakes state test as an unfair test for ELLs. They argued that it is not fair to compare the performance of an ELL to that of a native speaker of English who has always been in the education system in the U.S. Moreover, participants complained about the cultural bias as well as of the difficulty of the test items in the state test. Participants also criticized the overwhelming amount of vocabulary words that is used in the state test.

Regarding accommodations, participants reported that generally two testing accommodations were frequently provided to ELLs, extended testing time, one and half the time for each section, and bilingual dictionaries.

When asked about the impact of the high-stakes tests on ELLs, participants expressed that ELLs were being adversely emotionally affected by taking the HSPA. Participants stated that most ELLs felt frustrated and depressed due to the pressure that arises from having to pass this test as part of the graduation requirement. Students were scared that if they did not pass this test, they would not be able to graduate.

Regarding recommendations for better assessment, participants emphasized the importance of having a test that is designed specifically for ELLs. Until we have a test designed for ELLs, participants requested that ELLs be tested in their native languages. Student participant also asked for more time.

Conclusion of the Pilot Study

The pilot study shed light on the challenges that face ELLs with the state test, however, it was limited by the number of participants and the scope of the study. Thus, the research questions proposed in this study was expanded to give a detailed picture regarding the experience of ELLs with the mandated high-stakes state tests. Specifically, the research questions were crafted to provide insight into the experience of ELLs before, during and after taking the high-stakes state test. In addition, this study was extended to include a larger number of participants. An online survey was added to get the perspectives of teachers from all over New Jersey concerning ELLs' challenges with the state test. Furthermore, interviews were held with ESL, bilingual, and math teachers as well as with students from different backgrounds.

Methodology of the Study

This mixed-method research study used online teacher survey, interviews, and document reviews as sources of data collection. The purpose of the study was to examine the practices, challenges, and impact of high-stakes mandated statewide assessments on high school ELLs through the perspectives of teachers and ELLs. The study explored the extent to which the assessment practices used address the educational needs of ELLs.

Site Selection

The school selected for the study, Seabed High school, is a high school in New Jersey. During the time of the study, fall 2013, the school served approximately 2,125 students in grades 9-12, of which approximately 47.0 % were Hispanic students, 18.0% African-American students, and 20.0% Asian students. Seabed school population included 69.0 % of students who were economically disadvantaged, and 15.0% of students in the ELL subgroup.

The primary languages spoken by the school students at home in order of frequency were English, Spanish, Arabic, Gujarati, Urdu, and Tagalog,. Schoolwide graduation rate was approximately 73.0% and 69.0% for ELLs. Regarding graduation path, approximately 69.0 % of the school graduates graduated by passing both sections of the HSPA, 22.0 % through the AHSA and 9.0 % were exempt (an appeal process). The school ESL program included four levels; ESL 1 (Port of Entry), ESL 2, ESL 3, and ESL 4/Exit. ESL4/Exit is the last level in the ESL program and so it is also called exit level as ELLs do not need to go to ESL classes anymore but can join regular English classes afterwards.

Participants

Survey participants. A request to participate in the online teacher survey hosted

on the survey monkey website was sent via email to NJTESOL/NJBE members and to teachers through researcher's personal communications. The survey was available to the teachers from 10/16/2013 to 1/15/2014. A total of 90 teachers accessed the survey. Three teacher responses were deleted as they did not represent the target population and sixteen surveys were incomplete. The total number of complete surveys from target groups was 71, the majority of which were members of the state association, NJTESOL. Teacher representatives from sixteen of the twenty-one counties in New Jersey participated in the survey.

The first six questions of the 37 survey questions requested demographic information. The purpose of these questions was to establish the experience of the respondents in number of years teaching in general, as well as number of years teaching ELLs; the subject-area(s) teaching and which grade level; and the county in which they teach in order to ensure we have a good representation from all over the state.

Interview participants. Interview participants in the present study were 7 high school ESL/ bilingual teachers and content area teachers who teach ELLs as well as 10 high school ELLs in ESL/ bilingual program. Subjects from the selected site, Seabed high school, who met the study's inclusion/ exclusion criteria were asked to participate in the study.

Inclusion criteria: Subjects were eligible if the following criteria were met:

- High school content area teachers in New Jersey who teach English language learners.
- High School English as a second language (ESL)/ bilingual teachers in New Jersey.

- High School English language learners in ESL/ bilingual programs who have passed and/or failed the HSPA.

Exclusion criteria: Subjects who met any of the following criteria were excluded from this study:

- Teachers who are not teaching high school English language learners.
- Native-English speaking students.

Teachers and students who met the enrollment criteria were provided with a detailed explanation of the study. Participants who met the study enrollment criteria and who agreed to participate were 7 high school ESL/ bilingual teachers and content area teachers who teach English language learners as well as 10 high school ELLs in ESL/ bilingual program. All participants were asked to sign a consent form. Interviews were conducted with the participants at Seabed High School in the fall of 2013 (all names in this study are pseudonyms, for purposes of confidentiality).

Teacher interviewees. At the micro level, perspectives were gained from seven teachers from a school in New Jersey; three ESL teachers (Ms. Pratig, Ms. Caffé, and Ms. Strongwater), two math teachers (Ms. Bloomfield and Ms. Cushion), one bilingual math teacher (Mr. Mitchel), and the coordinator for the ELL and the World language department (Ms. Honest). Of the seven teachers, five were born in the United States. The other two teachers were foreign born, Ms. Pratig was an immigrant and Ms. Bloomfield was an English language learner herself and she arrived in the U.S. in middle school.

Student interviewees. The students' participants in this study were ten high school ELLs in New Jersey; three Indians (Herang, Usha, and Pria), two Hispanics

(Carmen from Dominican Republic and José from Mexico), and five Egyptians (Marina, Maha, Youssef, Mina, and Mark). The student participants were selected by the teachers. The number of years ELL participants have been in the U.S. ranged from less than one year to four years; with only one student being in the U.S. for less than one year.

Concerning students' ESL level, all ELL interviewees, except Mark who already exited ESL and graduated, were seniors and were in ESL 4/ Exit level. Regarding the number of attempts ELL participants needed to pass the HSPA, 80% of the students had to take the HSPA math section two times; till the time of the interviews in December 2013. At the time of the interview, the results were not out yet so students did not know if they passed or not. For the HSPA language arts section, 50% of the student interviewees passed it in the first attempt, 40% had to take it 2 times and the results were not out yet at the time of the interview, however, one student had to take the test 3 times and the AHSA one time and then he passed through the state appeal.

Instruments

This study used an online teacher survey, interviews, and document review as sources of data collection. The rationale for this design was to take advantage of the benefits of all three sources of data collection. The three data collection instruments are discussed below. Target teachers and students were voluntarily asked to participate in this study.

Survey

Ritchie, Lewis and Elam (2003) recommended that surveys be used in research for three reasons. First, when time and money are limited, surveys are ideal data collection instrument. Second, surveys are easy to administer confidentially. Third, surveys are useful confirmation tools when validating other findings.

The researcher created web-based teacher survey, was used to get a broader view of the perspectives of teachers working in different school districts across New Jersey. Moreover, by using an online survey, respondents could have more time to give thoughtful answers than if the survey was conducted in person or on the telephone.

Data were collected through a researcher created web-based survey (Appendix A) managed by SurveyMonkey.com. A voluntary and anonymous online survey was administered to New Jersey teachers only. Surveys were sent by email to NJTESOL-NJBE members to get a broader view of the perspectives of teachers working in different school districts all over New Jersey. Directions regarding how to complete the survey was included on the survey. The survey needed approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

The survey included 37 questions and is composed of two sections. The first section comprised six questions which requested demographic information. The purpose of these questions was to establish the experience of the respondents in number of years teaching in general, as well as number of years teaching ELLs; the subject-area(s) teaching and which grade level; and the county in which they teach in order to ensure there is a good representation from all over New Jersey.

The second section of the survey examined teachers' perception regarding ELLs' performance on the high-stakes state tests, ELLs' challenges with taking these tests, practices used to support ELLs before and during the statewide tests, and the impact of these high-stakes statewide tests on ELLs. The second section of the survey used open-ended questions to identify the challenges that ELLs face when taking statewide tests as well as helpful testing accommodations for ELLs. The survey ended by asking teachers

about their recommendations for best assessment practices for ELLs. To help determine the validity of the statements and questions, the survey was field tested.

Teacher survey pilot testing. The survey was field-tested with six teachers not participating in the actual study. The purpose of the pilot test was to assess the instrument for clarity and to identify potential problems with the format or function of the survey. Pilot test participants were asked to respond on survey format, length, feasibility and clarity of questions. The participants pointed out unclear formatting and directions, and questions that lacked clarity. As well, participants suggested changing the response format of some items to free response. Their input helped formulate and refine questions and statements; necessary adjustments were made before administering the survey to the study participant group. The final version of the survey consisted of 37 questions.

Survey data collection plan. A request to participate in the teacher online survey (Appendix A) was sent via email to NJTESOL/NJBE members and to teachers through researcher's personal communications. All members who receive the association's list-serve messages who are high school ESL, bilingual, and math teachers teaching ELLs in the state of New Jersey were invited to take part in the online survey. The teachers received an email on 10/16/2013 with information about the survey and a website link for the survey which was hosted on the survey monkey website (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>). Participants read through the questions and responded directly on the website. The survey monkey website collected the responses and stored the data for analysis.

The survey was available to the targeted teachers from 10/16/2013 to 1/15/2014. Another email to participate in the survey along with a direct link to the online survey

website was resent on 12/14/2013 as a friendly reminder for those who did not participate. As a result of this process, the total number of teachers receiving the survey link to participate is unknown.

Interviews

The study also used interviews as a source of data collection. Target teachers and students were invited to voluntarily take part in an audiotaped interview. Interviews were conducted with 7 high school teachers (Appendix C) and 10 high school ELLs (Appendix F). Researchers (Kvale, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2006) recommended that interviews be used in research for many reasons. Interviews allow the participants to express their opinions in their own words rather than being restricted to predetermined categories. Also, interviews provide high credibility and face validity. Furthermore, interviews allow the researcher to probe for more details, correct misunderstandings, control the order of question answering, determine a high response rate, and ensure that participants are interpreting questions the way they were intended (Kvale, 2009).

Interviews were used in the current study to collect information on the perceptions of teachers and students regarding the practices, challenges and impact of mandated high-stakes statewide assessments on ELLs. All interviews were conducted in a one-on-one setting in the Seabed high school. All participants completed permission forms (Appendices B, D & E) prior to participating in the interviews and were informed of the purpose of the interviews and assured of their confidentiality and the anonymity of their responses. Interviews were audio-recorded and the researcher took notes on a paper copy of the interview questions. Student participants were given as much time as they needed to formulate their responses and answer the questions.

The purpose of the interview was to obtain in-depth understanding of the practices, challenges and impact related to mandated statewide tests for ELLs. The teachers had interview questions similar to those of the students; however, the questions were tailored to fit their viewpoint as instructors and implementers. The questions were intended to elicit meaningful perceptions tied to the participants' own life experiences. The audio files were transcribed after the interviews.

Document Reviews

According to Taschereau (1998), a document review can be an inexpensive way of identifying problems to investigate further and provide evidence to support the perceptions gathered from surveys and interviews. Patton (2002) maintained that documents provide valuable information because of what the researcher can learn directly from reading them. Documents also provide ideas for questions that can be investigated further through interviews.

In this study, documents that were examined include policies at the federal, state, and local levels, related to the education and assessment of ELLs such as the NCLB Act (2001), the Handbook from the high school, New Jersey High School Proficiency Assessment: District/School Test Coordinator Manual, New Jersey State Report Card, High School Report card, High School Proficiency Assessment: Student Preparation Booklet, High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA): Your Guide to the HSPA, New Jersey No Child Left Behind: Federal Title Program Resources Legislation, Regulations & Guidance, New Jersey No Child Left Behind: NCLB Waiver Application, and the electronic web site of New Jersey Department of Education.

Patton (2002) stressed the importance of triangulating information in research,

and examining the multiple documents serves this purpose. By examining documents, more evidence was gathered to support or to refute the information collected from the interviews and the survey.

Data Analysis

Data from the teacher online survey were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. According to Gall, Gall and Borg (2005), descriptive statistics are useful in “summarizing all the data in the form of a few simple numerical expressions ... lead to mathematically precise statements” (p.155). Closed-ended survey questions’ responses were grouped by ratings and analyzed using frequencies and descriptive statistics. Open-ended questions were analyzed and grouped according to themes. According to Patton (2002), the purpose of qualitative inquiry is producing findings and making sense of the large amounts of data, identifying significant patterns and constructing a framework for communicating what the data reveals.

Regarding the interviews, each of the 17 study interviews was recorded on a handheld digital recorder. According to Seidman (1998), to work “most reliably with the words of participants, the researcher has to transform those spoken words into a written text to study ... by preserving the words of the participants, researcher have their original data” (p. 97). Hence, all interviews were transcribed by the researcher. Maxwell (2005) suggested that listening to the interview tapes before transcribing can be an opportunity for analysis, as it would help the researcher arrive at tentative ideas about categories and relationships as well. So before transcribing, the researcher listened to all of the audio files of the interviews to familiarize herself with the data and to find connections between the data.

In this study, the researcher conducted the interviews with 7 teachers and 10 ELLs. All participants spoke in English with the exception of one student who preferred to speak in Arabic. The researcher translated his interview word-by-word into English. Since the goal was to hear ELLs' voices in as natural form as possible, the researcher did not correct any grammar or linguistic mistakes when transcribing. Thus, the students' comments that are presented in the quotes throughout this study represent the authentic texts and are included without any grammatical or linguistic changes.

Creswell (2002) recommended that the researcher reads through all of the data thoroughly several times to gain a close understanding of the material. For this study, once the researcher completed transcribing the data, she carefully read the transcripts looking for emergent themes and wrote notes in the margins. The researcher then read the transcripts multiple times to get more familiar with the data and to identify any additional themes. Next, the researcher continued creating categories and themes, narrowing them into codes. During this process, the researcher jotted down any relationships that she noticed paying special attention to the vocabulary that the participants used as it may point to important topics.

Delamont (1992 cited in Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) suggested that during the interpretation of the coded data, "one should be looking for patterns, themes, and regularities as well as contrasts, paradoxes, and irregularities. One can then move toward generalizing and theorizing from the data" (p. 47). Coding categories from each participant's data was compared looking at connectedness among the data. At this point, the researcher reflected on the findings to look for overarching themes and patterns of commonalities and discrepancies so that an interpretation could be made. The researcher

also reviewed all the data in the light of the study's research questions, matching the emergent findings to them. In this study, the generalizations that emerged from the interview data were used to support and extend the data obtained from the teacher online survey.

Attention was given to the representation of participants in the findings. Therefore, quotes from participants were added in the findings to maintain an authenticity of voice. Cook-Sather (2002) referred to the need for researchers to represent participant voices in the "fairest ways possible and, at the same time, avoid relinquishing roles in interpreting findings" (p. 8). Therefore, representative quotes of teachers' and students' voices were used in order to elaborate on patterns among the voices.

Social justice theory provided a theoretical framework to understand this study's examination of educational equity, as the main goal of social justice education is to socially and institutionally reform education (Bell, 2007). This current study used the lens of social justice theory to analyze whether the assessment system addressed the educational needs of ELLs.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln & Guba (1985) explained that in a qualitative study, trustworthiness includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of findings. In order to promote credibility in findings, triangulation was used. According to Maxwell (2005), triangulation is "collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings, using a variety of methods" (p. 93). To examine the challenges, practices, and impact of high-stakes state tests on ELLs, data was collected from documents, interviews, and surveys. The benefit of using multiple data collection techniques is to reveal

different aspects of the reality (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, data was collected from a variety of participants in this study, including the perspectives of ESL teachers, content area teachers, and ELLs. This allowed for a broader view and multiple perspectives of the issue studied. Interviews, survey, and document review along with perspectives of different people all helped achieve triangulation, which enhanced the validity of the study.

Concerning transferability, Lincoln & Guba, (1985) argue that the use of “rich, thick description” can help the reader decide if the results can be transferred. An effort was made to provide all details about the participants and the interview, including setting and words used by the participants when reporting on their experiences with high-stakes tests.

Dependability and confirmability were established through the data collection instruments that helped promote triangulation of the data. Furthermore, details were given of the conditions under which the results were obtained. This study made use of interviews, online survey and document review. The interviews examined the perspectives of a variety of participants including ESL teachers, content-area teachers as well as ELLs which in turn helped make the findings and conclusions more convincing.

Disclosure of Data

This research is confidential. Confidential means that the research records include some information about the subject, such as [name, years of experience, subject area teaching] for teachers and [name, years in the U.S., first language, English language proficiency level] for students. Subjects who agreed to take part in the study and who signed the consent form were assigned a random code number. The subject’s name

appears only on a list of subjects, and is linked to the code number that is assigned to the subject. Therefore, data collection was confidential.

The principal investigator kept this information confidential by limiting individual's access to the research data and keeping it in a secure location. The information was stored in a locked file cabinet and linked with a code to the subject's identity on a password-protected computer. The research team and the Institutional Review Board at Rutgers University were the only parties that were allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. Furthermore, the principal investigator kept the digital audio files on a password-protected computer. Audio files were heard only for research purposes by the investigator. Pseudonyms for the school, district and subjects participating in this study were used to maintain anonymity.

Conclusion

This study discussed issues related to the inclusion of ELLs in mandated high-stakes statewide assessments. The need for this study was based on the increasing number of ELLs in U.S. schools paired with more emphasis on high-stakes state testing requirements. During the time of this study, the State of New Jersey was in the process of implementing more rigorous mandated high-stakes tests. In the current as well as in the forth-coming state assessment system, ELLs are being held to the same standards and accountability as their native English-speaking peers. The study focused on the need to provide equitable education for all students in our schools.

The assessment of ELLs on high-stakes state tests is challenging, as these ELLs are still learning English and may not be able to demonstrate what they know and are able to do in the academic content areas in the new language, English. This study examined

the challenges ELLs had with these high-stakes state tests from the perspectives of ELLs and their teachers. It also examined the impact of high-stakes state tests on ELLs. Furthermore, the study described and analyzed the testing accommodations provided to ELLs and identified the most helpful and appropriate testing accommodations for ELLs from both teachers and ELLs' perspectives. The study attempted to identify best effective assessment policies and practices that would ensure that ELLs' educational needs are being met.

The current study used surveys, interviews and document review to collect data to examine the extent to which the assessment practices employed address the educational needs of ELLs. The study used the lens of the social justice theory to explore whether the educational policies, represented by the mandates of NCLB and its assessment practices, moved us closer to or further from, the goal of ensuring equal opportunity for ELLs.

It is hoped that this study would contribute to the field of ESL education by serving as a resource for decision makers to use in efforts to implement effective assessment system that would increase student achievement and create equity and excellence in the assessment of ELLs.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this mixed method study was to analyze the practices, challenges, and impact of mandated high-stakes statewide assessments on high school ELLs from the perspective of ESL teachers, content area teachers teaching ELLs and English language learners. The study used a teacher online survey and interviews with teachers and ELLs to examine the extent to which the assessment system used addresses the educational needs of ELLs. At the Macro level, seventy-one teachers, the majority of which are members of the state association, NJTESOL, responded to the survey. At the micro level, seven teachers and ten ELLs from Seabed high school in New Jersey were interviewed regarding ELLs experience with high-stakes state tests. The challenges ELLs face when taking these tests as well as the academic and psychological impact of these tests on ELLs were investigated. Furthermore, the study included descriptions and an analysis of the accommodations provided to ELLs during high-stakes testing. The study used the lens of social justice theory, represented by the work of John Rawls (1971) and David Miller (1991) to explore whether the educational policies, represented by the mandates of NCLB and its assessment practices, move us closer to or further from, the goal of ensuring equal opportunity for ELLs.

In this chapter, I report the results of my analysis of the teacher online survey, as well as the results of the teachers' and ELLs' interviews.

Research Questions

The research question guiding the study was:

What are the perspectives and experiences of ELLs and their teachers in New Jersey

regarding high-stakes state assessments?

The subsequent research questions for this study were as follows:

1. Do high-stakes state assessments fairly and accurately measure ELLs' knowledge from the perspectives of teachers and ELLs?
2. What kinds of testing support do ELLs receive before taking high-stakes state assessments?
3. What types of testing accommodations are used during high-stakes state assessments to address ELLs' needs? How helpful are these accommodations?
4. What is the impact of the high-stakes standardized state assessments on ELLs?
5. What recommendations can be made to improve assessment practices for ELLs?

Macro Level Teacher Survey Data Analysis

Teacher Demographics and Survey Setting

A total of 90 teachers from all over New Jersey accessed the survey. Three teacher responses were deleted (Spanish, Italian, and middle school teachers); as they did not represent the target population. Also, 16 surveys were incomplete. The total number of complete surveys from target groups was 71.

The first six questions of the 37 survey questions requested demographic information. The purpose of these questions was to establish the experience of the respondents in number of years teaching in general, as well as number of years teaching ELLs; the subject-area(s) teaching and which grade level; and the county in which they teach in order to ensure we have a good representation from all over New Jersey. Table (1) shows the counties represented and the percentage of respondents from each county.

Table 1

Number and Percentage of Respondents from NJ Counties

Answer Choices	N	Responses
Atlantic	4	5.63%
Bergen	7	9.86%
Burlington	8	11.27%
Camden	5	7.04%
Cape May	0	0%
Cumberland	1	1.41%
Essex	6	8.45%
Gloucester	1	1.41%
Hudson	6	8.45%
Hunterdon	0	0%
Mercer	2	2.82%
Middlesex	4	5.63%
Monmouth	7	9.86%
Morris	5	7.04%
Ocean	5	7.04%
Passaic	1	1.41%
Salem	0	0%
Somerset	0	0%
Sussex	1	1.41%
Union	8	11.27%
Warren	0	0%

The results showed that teacher representatives from sixteen of the twenty-one counties in New Jersey participated in the survey. The counties not represented were

Cape May, Hunterdon, Salem, Somerset, and Warren.

Characteristics of New Jersey teacher respondents at the macro level. This section presents background information about the teacher survey respondents.

Years of teaching experience. The findings are presented in table (2).

Table 2

Number and Percentage of Years of Teaching Experience

Years of Teaching	N	Percentage
0 - 5 years	5	7.04%
6 - 10 years	12	16.9%
11- 20 years	30	42.25%
21+ years	24	33.8%

Results showed that only 7.0% of the teacher respondents indicated they had fewer than five years of teaching experience. Approximately three quarters of the teacher participants had more than 10 years of teaching experience with 42.25% indicating that they had taught for 11 to 20 years and 33.8% for more than 21 years.

Years of experience teaching ELLs. Table (3) presents results pertaining to participants' years of experience teaching ELLs.

Table 3

Number and Percentage of Years of Experience Teaching ELLs

Years of Teaching ELLs	N	Percentage
0 - 5 years	13	18.31%
6 - 10 years	19	26.76%
11- 20 years	22	30.99%
21+ years	17	23.94%

Survey participants' years of teaching ELLs ranged from less than 5 years (18.31%) to more than 21 years (23.94%). Most teachers had more than 10 years of experience. The highest percentage of respondents (30.99%) indicated that they had taught between 11 to 20 years with 26.76% indicating that they had taught for 6 to 10 years.

Subject area(s). Data are reported in table (4).

Table 4

Subject Area(s) of Teachers Teaching ELLs

Subject Area(s)	Percentage
ESL	74.29%
ESL/English	8.57%
English	5.71%
ESL/Bilingual	2.86%
Bilingual	2.86%
Math	5.71%

Data showed that the highest percentage of respondents (74.29 %) was ESL teachers. Survey results also revealed that 8.57% of the respondents taught both ESL and English; while 5.71% taught exclusively English. Similarly, 5.71% of the respondents indicated they taught math. The lowest represented groups were ESL/bilingual (2.86%) and bilingual teachers (2.86%).

Grade(s) level. Table (5) presents the data.

Table 5

Distribution of Teacher Respondents by Grade(s) Level

Grade Level(s)	Percentage
High School	60.56%
Middle/High	18.31%
Elementary/ High	2.82%
K-12	18.31%

The greatest percentage of teachers, more than half (60.56%) reported teaching exclusively in high school. On the other hand, 18.31% of the participants indicated teaching in middle school grades besides high school compared to only 2.82% teaching in both elementary school and high school. Survey results also revealed that 18.31% of the respondents taught at different grade levels (k through 12).

Number of ELLs/day. The number of ELLs the respondents taught ranged widely from 2 students to 120 ELLs/day. Results are shown in table (6).

Table 6

Number of ELLs taught by Respondents per Day

Number of ELLs/ day	Percentage
Less than 20	30.99%
20-39	43.66%
40+	25.35%

Survey results showed that the highest percentage of respondents (43.66%) taught between 20 to 39 ELLs/day. In addition, results presented in table 2 show that 30.99% of the participants reported teaching less than 20 ELLs/day with 2 students/day being reported as the lowest number. Furthermore, approximately quarter of the teacher participants (25.35%) indicated teaching more than 40 ELLs/day with 120 ELL/day being reported as the highest.

Macro Level Teacher Survey Responses regarding Fairness and Accuracy of HSPA for ELLs

Teacher respondents shared their perception regarding ELLs' experience taking the HSPA test.

Appropriateness of HSPA for ELLs. The results of the perceptions of the survey participants appeared to be a general dislike of the assessment practices occurring to ELLs. Table (7) represents the findings.

Table 7

Teachers' Responses regarding Fairness and Accuracy of HSPA for ELLs

Survey item	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree
The HSPA is an appropriate assessment tool for ELL students.	5.54% N(4)	94.46% N(67)
Current statewide standardized tests help bring ELLs up to high standards.	14.08% N(10)	85.92% N(61)

The highest percentage of teachers (94.46%) strongly disagreed (52.11%) or disagreed (42.25%) that the HSPA is an appropriate assessment tool for ELLs. In addition, more than 85% of the teachers strongly disagreed (36.62%) or disagreed (49.30%) that

mandated high-stakes statewide tests help bring ELLs up to high standards, with 0% of teachers strongly agreed with the statement. Teachers' responses show that there appear to be a mismatch between the goals of the HSPA and the purpose for which it is used.

Teachers also shared their perception regarding ELLs' performance on the high stakes statewide test; results are shown in table (8).

Table 8

Teachers' Responses regarding ELLs' Performance on the State Test

Survey item	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree
There is a gap between the performance of ELLs and native English-speaking students on statewide-standardized tests (HSPA).	95.78% N(68)	4.23% N(3)
Many ELLs have good attendance rate	84.51% N(60)	15.49% N(11)

When asked about the performance of ELLs on the HSPA, 46.48% of the teacher respondents reported that ELLs do "poor" on the test, and 45.07% said they do "fair". On the other hand, only a minority of teachers indicated that ELLs do "well" (7.04%) on the HSPA with only one respondent (1.41%) reporting they do "very well". Furthermore, results showed that the majority of teachers (95.78%) strongly agreed (54.93%) or agreed (40.85%) that there is a gap between the performance of ELLs and native English speakers on the statewide tests. However, survey results revealed that the problem is not related to ELLs' attendance rate as 84.51% of the teachers strongly agreed (46.48%) or agreed (38.03%) that many ELLs have good attendance rates.

Teacher respondents also expressed their concern regarding the use of the HSPA with ELLs. Table (9) presents the findings.

Table 9

Teachers' Responses regarding the Use of the HSPA with ELLs

Survey item	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree
It is more difficult for ELLs to pass the HSPA test than native-English speaking students	94.36% N(67)	5.64% N(4)
Many ELLs do not pass the HSPA the first time.	95.72% N(67)	4.29% N(3)
It is not fair to include ELLs in the same statewide-standardized tests that are designed for native English-speaking students.	87.32% N(62)	12.68% N(9)

When asked about the difficulty of the HSPA, the highest percentage of teachers (94.36%) strongly agreed (69.01%) or agreed (25.35%) that it is more difficult for ELLs to pass the HSPA than for native English speakers and so more than 95% of teacher respondents strongly agreed (54.29%) or agreed (41.43%) that many ELLs do not pass the HSPA the first time they take it. In addition, more than 87% of teacher respondents strongly agreed (54.93%) or agreed (32.39%) that it is not fair to include ELLs in the same state tests that are basically designed for native English-speaking students. It appears from teachers' responses that the majority of teachers believe that the HSPA test is difficult for ELLs and is not an appropriate assessment choice for ELLs as it is specifically designed for native English speakers.

Table 10

Teachers' Responses regarding the Use of the HSPA with ELLs (cont.)

Survey item	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree
Many ELLs are required to take the HSPA in English before they have developed the linguistic ability to do so.	98.59% N(70)	1.41% N(1)
Statewide-standardized tests are at ELLs' English proficiency level.	5.71% N(4)	94.29% N(66)
ELLs can easily understand content area statewide tests as these tests are at ELLs' English language proficiency level.	18.57% N(13)	81.43% n(57)
If students are deficient in English, then their performance on the content-area statewide assessments will be affected.	98.59% N(70)	1.41% N(1)

Teachers shared their perception regarding whether the HSPA fairly and accurately measures ELLs' content knowledge as well as on the challenges ELLs face when taking the HSPA. Findings are presented in table 10. All of the teacher respondents (98.6%) except one teacher (1.41%) strongly agreed (76.06%) or agreed (22.54%) that many ELLs are required to take the HSPA in English before they have developed the linguistic ability to do so. Consequently, the majority of teachers, approximately 95% of the teachers, strongly disagreed (54.29%) or disagreed (40%) with the statement that statewide tests are at ELLs' English proficiency level and more than 80% strongly disagreed (47.14%) or disagreed (34.29%) that ELLs can easily understand content area statewide tests as these tests are at ELLs' English language proficiency level. Based on these responses, nearly all teachers (98.6%) strongly agreed (83.10%) or agreed (15.49%) that if students were deficient in English, then their performance on the

content-area statewide assessments would be affected. Teachers' answers reflect their belief that statewide tests are not at ELLs' language proficiency level and so do not fairly or accurately assess ELLs' content knowledge.

In response to the statement, "statewide tests accurately assess the content knowledge of ELLs," the highest percentage of respondents (95.59%) expressed their disagreement with such a statement as the majority of the teachers strongly disagreed (54.41%) or disagreed (41.18%). Moreover, when asked about ELLs' performance on informal classroom assessments, teachers indicated that many ELLs' performance and grades on informal classroom assessments are better than their performance on the statewide test, as 44.29% strongly agreed and 51.43% agreed with this statement.

Cultural and linguistic biases. Teachers' responses showed a concern regarding the cultural and linguistic biases of test items in both sections of the HSPA, math and language arts. Table 11 shows the findings.

Table 11

Teachers' Responses regarding Cultural and Linguistic Biases of Test Items

Survey item	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree
HSPA tests contain language and cultural biases that can affect ELLs' performance on the tests.	95.78% N(68)	4.22% N(3)
ELLs may not be able to understand some test items in the HSPA because they contain background information which is outside ELLs' cultural context and life experiences.	97.18% N(69)	2.82% N(2)

When asked if the statewide test contain language and cultural biases that can affect ELLs' performance on these tests, more than 95% of the teachers strongly agreed

(64.79%) or agreed (30.99%) to such a statement. Similarly, 97.18% of the teacher participants strongly agreed (71.83%) or agreed (25.35%) that ELLs may not be able to understand some test items in the HSPA because they contain background information that is outside ELLs' cultural context and life experiences.

Difficult vocabulary. Besides the aforementioned challenges that ELLs face with the state test, vocabulary was also a major challenge. Table 12 presents the findings.

Table 12

Teachers' Responses regarding Difficult Vocabulary of Test Items

Survey item	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree
Difficult vocabulary is a major obstacle to ELLs' performance on the HSPA.	95.78% N(68)	4.23% N(3)
The vocabulary words used in the HSPA tests are difficult and higher than ELLs' English proficiency level.	98.60% N(70)	1.41% N(1)
Many ELLs are good at math but because of the difficult vocabulary words that are used in the word problems, many of them don't pass.	88.73% N(63)	11.27% N(8)
ELLs' poor performance on statewide assessments is to a great extent related to the fact that the assessment is given in English only.	81.43% N(57)	18.57% N(13)

A high percentage of teachers (95.78%) strongly agreed (67.61%) or agreed (28.17) that difficult vocabulary is a major obstacle to ELLs' performance on the HSPA and so most teachers (98.6%) believed that the vocabulary words used in the state test are difficult and higher than ELLs' English proficiency level.

It appears that the vocabulary problem extends to the math section of the HSPA as well. When respondents were asked to voice their opinion on the statement that many ELLs are good at math but because of the difficult vocabulary words that are used in the word problems, many of them do not pass, 88.73% of the teachers strongly agreed or agreed with this statement. It was important to depict the math teachers' responses. Data showed that all of the math teachers who participated in this survey strongly agreed or agreed with the statement. However, almost 20% of the teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed that ELLs' poor performance on the HSPA is to a great extent related to the fact that it is given in English only.

Teachers' responses show that although most teachers agree that the HSPA is higher than ELLs' language proficiency level and that difficult vocabulary is a major obstacle to passing both sections of the HSPA, a percentage of teachers do not believe that the problem is that the test is administered in English. As will be discussed later, teachers believe that if the test was administered in more accessible English and with less cultural references, it would be less challenging for ELLs.

Macro Level Teacher Survey Responses regarding ELLs' Major Challenges with the State Test

Teachers were presented with an open-ended question to get their views about the major challenges ELLs face when taking the mandated high-stakes state tests. Responses were coded according to emerging themes. Responses that were coded by 10% or more of the teacher participants were considered as emerging themes. Open-ended questions provided the participants with the opportunity to respond with answers that may otherwise have not been probed by the survey's closed responses. A total of 58 teachers

responded to this open-ended question. Multiple responses were allowed. More than half (55%) of the teachers identified lack of English language proficiency as ELLs' major challenge with the test; teachers indicated that the state test is difficult and students are required to take it before they are proficient enough to do so. Approximately 30% of respondents cited vocabulary as a challenge; while almost 27% noted cultural bias and lack of background knowledge as major challenges for ELLs. Teachers expressed that the state test is very difficult and students are required to take an "English test" before they are proficient enough to do so. Other teacher concerns mentioned were reading passages, math word problems, lack of formal education, and limited time for preparation as major challenges to doing well on the state test.

Macro Level Teacher Survey Responses regarding Testing Support

Table 13

Teachers' Responses regarding Testing Support for ELLs

Survey item	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree
ELLs receive enough testing support to prepare them for the statewide tests	17.39% N(12)	82.61% N(57)

Respondents shared their perception regarding the testing support ELLs receive to prepare them for the HSPA (Table 13). In response to the statement, "ELLs receive enough testing support to prepare them for the statewide tests," teachers responded in the following ways: about 82% of teacher respondents indicated disagreement by choosing strongly disagree (27.54%) or disagree (55.07%) while a minority of the teachers (17.39%) expressed agreement with the statement, rating their agreement as strongly

agree (2.90%) or agree (14.49%).

Macro Level Teacher Survey Responses regarding Testing Accommodations

There was a wide range of answers regarding the testing accommodations allowed for ELLs during statewide tests. Table 14 depicts the percentage of accommodations used.

Table 14

Testing Accommodations allowed for ELLs during Statewide Tests

Answer Options	N	Response Percent
Additional time to complete test	61	85.9%
Scheduled rest breaks	17	23.9%
Until the student can no longer continue the activity	4	5.6%
Administer the test in several sessions	11	15.5%
Administer the test over several days	16	22.5%
Highlight key words or phrases in directions	14	19.7%
Read the test directions but not the test items	31	43.7%
Read the test directions and test items	6	8.5%
Native language dictionaries	50	70.4%
Native language version of test	10	14.1%
None	1	1.4%
Other (please specify)	19	26.8%

The highest percentage of participants reported that generally two testing accommodations were frequently provided to ELLs, extended testing time (85.92%) and bilingual dictionaries (70.42%). All other accommodations received less than 25%

response. This wide discrepancy of results could be due to the fact that more than 40% of the respondents teach other grade levels besides high school. Thus, there is a great possibility that teachers may have chosen to provide accommodations used with ELLs at elementary and middle school levels as well.

Table 15

How Helpful are the Testing Accommodations?

Answer Options	N	Response Percent
Very Much	5	7.25%
Much	15	21.74%
A Little	42	60.87%
Not at All	7	10.14%

In regards to the question, “To what extent are the testing accommodations that English language learners receive during the statewide tests helpful?” Sixty-nine teacher participants responded to the question. The highest percentage of respondents (60.87%) endorsed the view that the accommodations are “a little” helpful, and another 10.14% of participants considered it “not at all” helpful. On the other hand, 21.74% of the survey respondents reported that it is “much” helpful, while only 7.25% indicated that it is “very much” helpful.

Furthermore, teachers were presented with an open-ended question in order to elicit their opinion regarding what testing accommodations they believe would be more helpful for ELLs. Fifty-one participants responded to this question. Responses were coded according to emerging themes with those coded by 10% or more of the teacher

participants considered as emerging themes. Almost 28% of teachers' requested giving the test in ELLs' native language; while approximately 24% of teachers' responses wished for a test that is specifically created for ELLs, or a test on their English language proficiency level. Results also showed that almost 20% of the teachers requested reading directions aloud, paraphrasing directions and questions, proctor help to clarify difficult questions and vocabulary as helpful accommodations for ELLs. Moreover, 18% of respondents believed that ELLs should be exempted from the state test; and 16% cited using a native language dictionary, thesaurus, Google translate, or digital dictionary as helpful accommodations. Furthermore, approximately 14% of the teacher participants recommended extra time, administering the test on several days, and untimed test. Teachers' responses show that although some of them may have considered the current testing accommodations provided helpful, it appears that these accommodations are not enough.

Macro Level Teacher Survey Responses Regarding Impact of State Tests on ELLs

Overall, all respondents agreed that the statewide test has some kind of impact on ELLs. Table 16 reflects the findings.

Table 16

Teachers' Responses regarding Impact of High-Stakes Tests on ELLs

What is the impact of the statewide tests on ELLs (choose all that apply)?		
Delayed graduation	47	69.12%
No graduation	36	52.94%
Drop out	41	60.29%
Negative psychological impact	46	67.65%
Referral to special education	13	19.12
Grade retention	11	16.18%
No consequences at all	0	0%
Other (please specify)	8	11.76%

Not even a single teacher believed that the statewide tests have no impact on the ELLs. The impacts with the highest percentages, those receiving more than 50%, were delayed graduation (69.12%), negative psychological impact (67.65%), drop out (60.29%), and no graduation (52.94%). These results match teachers' responses on another question where they were asked if the requirements that ELLs take the HSPA test to graduate causes them to drop out. More than half of the teacher respondents (60%) strongly agreed (12.86%) or agreed (47.14%) with the statement.

Macro Level Teacher Survey Responses regarding Recommendations

Teacher participants were presented with an open-ended question that asked them to share their recommendations regarding the changes they would do if they were given the chance to make changes to the assessment practices used with ELLs. Forty-two teacher participants responded to the question. Responses were coded according to emerging themes with those coded by 10% or more of the teacher participants considered as emerging themes. More than 45% of the teachers' recommended a special test for ELLs based on their proficiency level, some suggested using WIDA, testing students in their native languages, and using students' classroom performance instead. Moreover, almost 25% of the participants recommended waiving or delaying assessment requirements until students develop English proficiency. Other recommendations mentioned were using less culturally biased reading passages with no or little idiomatic language, and ensuring the assessment measures student' content knowledge not language level.

Micro Level Teachers' Interview Results

This section presents the results of the data analysis of the interviews with seven

teachers at one school in New Jersey.

Characteristics of Teacher Interviewees at the Micro Level

Interviews were used as a source of data collection. Interviews were conducted with seven high school teachers at Seabed High School in the fall of 2013 (all names in this study are pseudonyms, for purposes of confidentiality). Table (16) presents teacher participants' characteristics.

Table 17

Characteristics of Teacher Interviewees

Teacher Name (pseudo)	Subject Area
Mr. Mitchel	Bilingual Math
Ms. Bloomfield	Math ESL
Ms. Pratig	ESL
Ms. Honest	ESL Coordinator
Ms. Caffé	ESL
Ms. Strongwater	ESL
Ms. Cushion	Math ESL

Perspectives were gained from seven teachers from one school in New Jersey; three ESL teachers (Ms. Pratig, Ms. Caffé, and Ms. Strongwater), two math teachers (Ms. Bloomfield and Ms. Cushion), one bilingual math teacher (Mr. Mitchel), and the coordinator for the ELL and the World language department (Ms. Honest). Of the seven teachers, five were born in the U.S. The other two teachers were foreign born, Ms. Pratig is an immigrant and Ms. Bloomfield was an English language learner herself and she arrived in the U.S. in middle school.

Micro Level

Teachers' Interview Analysis

Statewide Test: Fair or Unfair Test for ELLs?

Unclear goals. At the micro level, teachers' responses showed that there appears to be a mismatch between the goals of the high-stakes state tests and the purpose for which it is used. According to New Jersey Department of Education (2013), the objective of these high-stakes tests is to measure students' "knowledge and skills in the Core Curriculum Content Standards", which describe what a student "need to know and be able to do to be a productive citizen, and to succeed on the job, in college, or in the military." Teachers' responses seem to question how well high-stakes state tests meet these goals. Teachers questioned the value of the these tests in general as Ms.

Strongwater argued,

They say this is for life preparation, Yeah! Life preparation! You know what, I will not have to read a 12 or 15-page story if I don't want to as an adult, especially now with the Internet, you read the first three sentences of an article, and if it's interesting maybe you read the next paragraph. You skim; it's all skimming. What are you preparing them for? Unless they're gonna be doctors, lawyers, teachers, you know, what are you preparing them for? This is the excuse you're giving me! Well, if I've to write an email to Microsoft complaining that my computer is not working, I don't have to be that persuasive; I just need to be able to explain it, it doesn't have to be five paragraphs, it could be two you know. It doesn't mean they don't need to do the reading comprehension, yes they do, but that's my job. Stressing them out for a test that prepares them for college!

Ms. Strongwater's comment seems to question the goal as well as the rationale behind using the statewide tests. Her comment shows that some teachers may disagree with the published goal of state tests. She questioned "life preparation" as a valid goal of state tests; it is obvious that she is not convinced with "life preparation" as an excuse to overwhelm ELLs with these high-stakes state tests. She believes that in real life, not many of us use what the state test claims to prepare us for and she provides different examples to support her claim. Teachers also expressed their concern regarding the use of statewide tests with the ELLs. Likewise, Ms. Honest stated that "in every angle, every single test that comes from the state portrays our students the wrong way." Accordingly, teachers shared their thoughts regarding the HSPA as an "unfair test" for ELLs; some of the teachers cannot find a good reason why the ELL population has to take it; as a result, some totally disagree with it. Teachers gave different reasons for why they think the test is not appropriate for ELLs.

State test and ELLs' life circumstances. Ms. Strongwater rightly argued about the inappropriateness of this test for many ELLs, she questioned, "is it fair to give it to somebody who just got here, was a poor student back home and is here maybe because they're escaping political or economic tyranny in their countries." She then gives examples from her students' lives to clarify this point. She referred to one of the students who literally ran out of her home and crossed the borders because of sexual abuse; and she gave another account of a student whose sister was murdered, who also happened to be one of her students, and how her current student is worried about her niece. She then presented another case of a student who was homeless for 7 years and was persecuted and kicked out of her village back in Africa; and she questioned, "you think that kid is gonna

be really focusing on what score she got on the HSPA?” Accordingly, Ms. Honest concluded, “it’s completely unfair. It’s not just unfair that they have to take the test, it’s unfair the conditions under which they take the test.”

One test- two different population. Teachers also expressed their concern regarding the use of the same test (HSPA) for native English speakers with the English language learners. Teachers believed that the HSPA might function well for measuring the academic progress of native English speakers; however, it is not an appropriate assessment choice for ELLs as it is specifically designed for native English speakers. Participants argued that these standardized tests are designed for the mainstream American students, and so are not equitable to ELLs as Ms. Honest clarified,

The HSPA just you know gives a score for what the mainstream population has been working on since they were in kindergarten. Our students come in even the day before the HSPA, they come in on a Tuesday, they’re required to pass the HSPA on a Wednesday, when they can’t even read you know the label that says print your name.

Consequently, Ms. Strongwater shared her disappointment with the assessment process, “the whole process doesn’t make sense to me. I don’t get it. I just don’t get it.” She questioned “why would the state say, everybody has to take this test when this kid just walked into the country a week before, has no idea about English and he has to take the HSPA?” Mr. Mitchel had the same complaint, students are tested when they just come in the country, “if a student comes in let’s say last week and the testing is going on for the following week, the kid is still tested even though he’s been here for a couple of days.” Ms. Pratig claimed that “state test is the hardest one when they are new,” she then

commented that it is not fair to require a student who just came in today to sit for the exam the next week.

Likewise, Ms. Honest cannot find a good reason why ELLs are required to take this test; she argued that since, “monolingual students get 11 years to take this test. Why should the ELL population have a day or a year to take the test?” She added that according to research and even according to the state, for a student to acquire the needed skills to pass this test “you need to have been in the system for 11 years, they make it at 11th grade level so why ELLs taking it, you know, at one day, at 2 years?” Ms. Strongwater also elaborated on this point, “if you look at just the basic interpersonal communication, it can take up to three years for you to get just basic interpersonal communication going, never mind cognitive academic language proficiency.” She then concluded that this constitutes, “a huge disadvantage” for ELLs.

Similarly, Ms. Pratig presented her reasons why she believes that the state test is an inappropriate and unfair assessment tool for ELLs who just arrived in the country or have been here for few months or years, she clarified “HSPA is a high-level test in which not only English is there, but there’re high mental levels that should be there, like of thinking and everything. And then writing persuasive, writing expository, reading narrative and persuasive; all these things are never back there.” Accordingly, most teacher interviewees indicated that the state test does not measure students’ content knowledge as it is given in English and is higher than ELLs’ language proficiency level. Ms. Caffé for instance mentioned that the test is “way over their heads in terms of the literature, the content, what they’re asking, the experience and the maturation of the kids.” Similarly, Ms. Honest totally disagreed with this test, she concluded that this test

is “hurtful, I think it’s abuse, I think especially for the students that are coming for that first year.”

The teachers indicated that the language complexity of the test items and the fact that the test is given in English, students’ second language, makes the HSPA higher than ELLs’ language proficiency level and more a language proficiency test than content.

Consequently, when teachers were asked if they consider the HSPA a true reflection of ELLs’ content knowledge, most teachers shared their view that it is not as Ms.

Strongwater replied “No, no, absolutely not.” Teachers’ reasons were that as long as the HSPA is given in students’ second language, then it cannot be considered just a content assessment as Mr. Mitchel clarified “it’s given in English so that’s a big no no in the sense of them to achieve what they need to achieve.” Teachers also added that many students do better on informal classroom assessment, as Mr. Mitchel mentioned “I’ve seen kids do better in my class when I translated in their native language.” Ms. Caffee on the other hand, believed that the HSPA could only be considered a true reflection of students’ content knowledge “if you’ve been here and you go through the system. If you’ve just come in, no.”

At the same time teachers emphasized that they are not against testing ELLs but they are definitely against the assessment practices used with ELLs as Ms. Strongwater indicated,

I have no problem with them having to take a test, some kind of test, but there should be parameters, I mean, to me it’s common sense, if a kid comes in and hasn’t been in the country more than 10 minutes you know, no they shouldn’t have taken that test, you want to give them some kind of proficiency, fine.

Ms. Strongwater based her complain on the view that the HSPA might even be hard for some native English speaking students to pass so she questioned how can it then be used with ELLs, “you want me to take a state test that some kids who were born here can’t pass, it makes absolutely no sense at all.”

Daunting assessment process. There seem to be a consensus between teachers’ and students’ views regarding the unfairness and inappropriateness of the state test for ELLs. Both teachers and students, as will be discussed later, reflected on the overwhelming assessment process. Teachers shared ELLs’ view that this test is unfair and that the entire assessment process is a daunting one; as Ms. Strongwater vividly described the assessment process for ELLs,

If you don’t pass that test in the spring of your junior year, you have to take it, you have to come in September and take Saturday preparation classes then you have to take it again in October, then you have to wait stressed out from October to maybe the end of December, beginning of January to know if you passed or not. And if you didn’t pass, you have to take another set of Saturday classes, in addition to the AHSA, then you have to take the test again in March and possibly have to do the AHSA again if you didn’t pass then. And last year we didn’t know if those kids had passed or not until right before graduation.

Ms. Honest expressed that we should be encouraging students and acknowledging their progress instead of comparing them to their native English-speaking peers and giving them a message that they are still below the level. She explained that as teachers they have a hard time explaining to state officials that “our students are successful. Our students go from a second grade level to an eighth grade level, from the beginning of the

year to the end of the year.” Ms. Honest expressed that this is a great achievement that “should be applauded, you know, but when the HSPA comes in, they’re labeled failures.”

Unfortunately, in our educational system, students’ success is only measured by the scores earned on a high-stakes state tests rather than on how much students have actually learned. Teachers felt sad that this is the case with the ELL assessment policies and practices used. Instead of admiring what ELLs have gained and applauding what they are now able to do and have achieved; we criticize that they have not measured up to a kid who has lived in U.S. for 15 or 16 years. Therefore, teachers argued that ELLs should by no means be considered standing on equal footing with native English speakers who also face difficulty with passing the HSPA.

Economic disadvantage. Both Ms. Honest and Ms. Strongwater brought up an important aspect regarding the unfairness of the assessment system used with ELLs. They both discussed that the assessment system used puts too much load on these vulnerable students that it can go as far as ending their academic future if they do not pass these mandated high-stakes state tests. However, both teachers indicated that if these students were in catholic or private schools, their situation would have been very different as Ms. Honest explained,

If these students attend a catholic high school, they’re not required to take the test, and they succeed you know, so that test is not showing whether or not this student is successful. If these students go to any catholic school, they do well on the classes, they won’t have a problem, you know, and they will attend a good school, a good college and they will be fine. So it doesn’t measure you know the success of the student, no.

Ms. Strongwater confirmed Ms. Honest's point of view as she stated that she herself went to catholic school and she never had to take any of these tests and that these ELLs if they were able to afford to go to a catholic or private school will not have to go through all these hassles; an issue that throws light on equity for the socioeconomic disadvantaged students. Based on that, Ms. Strongwater concluded that for things to get better, "the whole thing has to be shaken up, shattered into million pieces and start over."

Micro Level Teachers' Responses regarding ELLs' Major Challenges with the State Test

Vocabulary a major obstacle. Teachers pinpointed that the difficult vocabulary and the language complexity of test items in the HSPA makes it more of a proficiency test than content assessment. One topic that was brought up by many participants in this study was the overwhelming amount of vocabulary that was used in the HSPA test. When asked about the challenges ELLs face with the test, Ms. Strongwater replied, "how about understanding every other word? Very basic, how about we don't understand every other word that is in there." Similarly, Ms. Cushion complained about the vocabulary used, "the words, the vocabulary is a little advanced for them." The ELLs in this study also identified vocabulary as the main difficulty encountered in the state test.

The results of the interview responses suggest that the overwhelming amount of difficult vocabulary words is a major obstacle to ELLs' performance on the HSPA, as the difficult vocabulary used interferes with students' understanding and so makes it hard for students to grip the meaning of what they are reading. The teachers also explained that the tests contained some idioms and proverbs that ELLs were not familiar with, a finding shared with survey teachers as well. Ms. Pratig commented "because they are not

immersed into local things, some proverb sayings ... certain expressions, they don't understand." Ms. Honest gave example of expressions used in the test that ELLs were not familiar with, "they use phrases like "he hit it out of the park" they don't know what that means, they don't understand it." The vocabulary problem affected ELLs' performance on both the language section as well as the math section of the HSPA.

Regarding the HSPA math section, teachers pointed out that many ELLs can do better at HSPA math but because of the difficult words that are used in the word problems, many of them do not pass as was clear in Mr. Mitchel's comment, "the word problems, the word problems is the major factor because they don't understand what they're asking. Open-ended questions which are word problems tend to do that." Ms. Cushion also expressed the same idea,

They struggle with the word problems because there're lots of words. If it's just a simple equation or simple numbers, they're very good at doing the examples but when they get to reading the problem, that's when they have trouble. So they do have difficulty like reading the big long word problems.

Teachers' responses showed that the main complaint was about the difficulty of the words used in the test and not the mathematics computation skills as Mr. Mitchel clarified that the main problem is with,

the language, expressing themselves in the language, like the math skills they tend to do a little better in the sense that they comprehend, like if I translate those two questions in Spanish, they have a better understanding and they do a little bit better in the math computation question.

It is worth noting that this was also one of the students' complaints. Participants'

responses suggest that content area subject tests does not just measure students' content knowledge but is to a great extent a test of their English language proficiency as well. ELLs are required to pass high-stakes tests in English before they have developed the linguistic ability to do so.

This point of view was discussed in research (Abedi, Hofstetter & Lord, 2004; Abedi & Lord, 2001; Abedi, Lord & Plummer, 1997) where the researchers found out that ELLs had difficulty with linguistically complex test items and that reducing linguistic complexity of test items narrowed the performance gap between ELLs and native English speaking students. The studies found a large performance gap between ELLs and native English -speaking students in reading and writing, the areas that have a significant amount of language demand. For math computation, the performance gap almost disappeared. These findings suggest that, by reducing the language complexity on assessments, an accommodation required by participants in this study, the validity of assessments could be improved.

To conclude, participants' responses showed that teachers questioned the validity of the state test; they questioned that if the test is in English and if the HSPA is higher than ELLs' language proficiency level then is it measuring students' content knowledge or their language proficiency? Another question that also presents itself is what are we measuring by these tests? Are we measuring students' content knowledge or are we measuring that ELLs have the same vocabulary, when they have been in this country for a day or even a year, as someone who has been here for fifteen or sixteen years? What are we really measuring with these mandated high-stakes state tests?

Reading passage. Teachers as well as ELLs shared same point of view regarding

the difficulty and lengthy reading passages used and identified it as a challenge to doing well on the test. Ms. Strongwater revealed her disappointment with the HSPA, she intensely described the reading texts used, “the readings that they pick, you have to be kidding me, they’re horrible, they’re absolutely horrible.” Similarly, Ms. Pratig identified reading passages as a major challenge for the ELLs, she stated that after the test, many students tell her “Miss reading was so hard, I couldn’t get it; I couldn’t get what it was saying.” Ms. Pratig then explained that,

Sometimes the ideas are very very tough ideas, they are like above the level of these new learners and they are sometimes very hard for them... for a student, for a new learner to grab inside there, what is there inside, what the writer wants to say in there; it’s satire, it’s irony, it’s that; it is hard for them, they can’t grab it.

Ms. Cushion had the same point of view regarding the readings, she stated, “reading, reading, my students, ESL students, they don’t know how to read or understand the questions.” This criticism regarding the reading texts used is due to the fact that the reading passages, as Ms. Strongwater phrased it, are “the most boring, unbelievably, and they pick the most random little tidbit of insignificant annoying information. They pick the most obscure part of history to talk about, the most obscure little detail about science that they can pick and they are boring, they are so incredibly boring and they’re overlong.”

Teachers also expressed their worries concerning the complexity of the test items and how it affected ELLs’ performance on the test. In fact, the difficulty and the vagueness of the test questions did not only take a fair share of teachers’ complains, but it was also the focus of students’ complains as will be discussed later. Ms. Strongwater

bitterly complained about the difficulty and complexity of the test items and the vagueness of the reading comprehension questions used,

the questions even as a teacher... as any Ivy Leaguer who has you know a fairly strong intellectual capacity, I can tell you this, some of those readings, couple of those questions, they're beyond the scope of some of the adults in this building, never mind the students and you want an ESL student who doesn't even have basic interpersonal communication skills to take that? It's ridiculous! It doesn't make any sense at all.

Ms. Strongwater added that some of the questions were very unclear to the point that,

We can argue back and forth as intelligent women about whether it is A or C, and neither of us will ever back down. You know a lot of answers are very unclear, and they want the kids just to be able to magically pick the one, come on, no, no, not for ESL kids.

Results showed that teachers criticized the validity of the test for ELLs who may not have been able to understand some test items because of their complexity and vagueness.

Moreover, Ms. Caffé shared her worries about the disconnect between the test and the students' backgrounds and experiences; a point that was discussed by survey teachers as well. She explained that, for instance, ELLs "don't know what pilgrimage is, it's hard, it's basically no connection;" and so she requested that the readings and topics used need to be "a little different. It has to be something with a little more they're familiar with and then I think they'll be ok." Participants' responses seem to suggest that some ELLs might not have been able to understand some test items because of their limited exposure to some of the context embedded in these items. Hence, an important accommodation that

needs to be integrated into statewide tests would include the use of reading texts and idiomatic expressions that ELLs can relate to and understand.

Participants' responses, survey teachers as well as teacher interviewees, suggest that statewide tests are an assessment of language in addition to content knowledge. That is, if students were deficient in English, then their performance on the content-area statewide assessments would be affected. As such it was no surprise that teachers reported that most of the time students needed two to three trials in order to pass the state test; some of the ELLs in this study even needed more than three trials to pass.

The findings of this study suggest that the failing scores that many ELLs receive on the high-stakes state tests do not necessarily show the real reasons for their failure to pass as many of these ELLs did not yet develop their English proficiency to a level that would help them pass these tests. It seems that ELLs were forced into rigorous academic testing long before they had developed their linguistic skills or had learned the skills necessary to succeed in an educational system that is so focused on high-stakes standardized tests.

Life issues. It is no secret that adapting to a new setting is definitely not easy; it is even more challenging if you are a teenager who does not speak the language of the new country you moved to. One of the challenges that was discussed by teachers to succeeding in the new system is students' social life circumstances. As immigrants and newcomers, most ELLs are overwhelmed academically because they are still in the process of learning English, adjusting to the culture and the school setting of their new country. Ironically, at the time when they are dealing with the many new obstacles in their lives, we are giving them more and more tests. Teacher participants presented some

students' real life stories and questioned if these young vulnerable individuals are being offered real opportunities to succeed in this high accountability era, or are being set up to fail.

Most teachers emphasized that most ELLs have more important challenges on their plates to worry about than the state test. Ms. Strongwater for instance clearly pictured some of the challenges many ELLs face,

You have to take this test but you also have to get a full-time job because Papa can't pay the bills, so you're working full-time and you have to take this test. Do you wanna eat or you wanna take the test? You wanna be able to feed your family, help your young brothers and sisters have food in their stomachs and clothes on their backs, or you're gonna focus on this extra class you've to take for test preparation. I mean, you know, how do you balance that?

Ms. Honest also emphasized this same point, she stated that because of the family responsibilities that many ELLs have, many of them are not able to make full use of the testing support programs that are offered, a point that was brought up by ELL interviewees as well. Ms. Honest explained that the school offers after school programs and Saturday HSPA preparation classes but the problem is that unlike the mainstream students, many ELLs have other family responsibilities,

their parents need help, so a lot of them work after school; so when it comes to attending after school programs maybe some do, some don't because of the responsibilities that they have at home and maybe that might take away of an extra hour that they can dedicate just to acquiring the language but it's hard, it's hard for them.

Teachers' responses suggested that for some students, their life circumstances may limit their opportunities to achieve and to focus on their education. As a result, in this high-stakes assessment era many of them often find the school environment overwhelming and frustrating.

Ms. Honest revealed another aspect regarding the inappropriateness of the state test for the ELL population. She shed some light on the background of some ELLs to show how unfair and inappropriate the state test is to many of them. She explained that some of the students come from villages where they use,

some languages like Krio not Creole “K r i o” Saubo “S a u b o;” languages that are not written languages, these students have come from villages, where they had no formal education. They are from farms and the first time they attend school is coming here to this school, and again they are required to pass the HSPA.

Ms. Honest explained that these ELLs had no formal education and they use very rare oral languages which makes it very hard for the school and the district to find any resources or anyone who can help with translation. She then questioned the rationale behind presenting these students with high-stakes state tests.

Ms. Strongwater also pointed out that many of the ELLs have crossed the borders and have come to this country after running out of their homes or countries because of sexual abuse, political or religious oppression. She then asked if it is fair to give these vulnerable creatures such high-stakes state tests that even some native-English speaking students find hard to pass. A legitimate question that we present to education policy makers.

Mr. Mitchel, likewise, described the dilemma and the outside factors that many ELLs have to deal with, he expertly identified the challenges ELLs face, “they are coming to a new country, they don’t understand the culture, they try to assimilate, be accepted, trying to assimilate right off the bat. They have family as well trying to assimilate, trying to come into the country.” Mr. Mitchel then explained that all this put stress on these young learners; he then added that instead of trying to help them, our assessment policy plays a role in adding to their level of stress; “so all these factors tend to you know hinder the child’s performance and then we’re putting another label, you can’t achieve this. Lots of these kids stressed, stressed to a level that really sometimes drop out of school.”

Ms. Honest discussed another important factor that she believes adds to the unfairness of this test and which negatively affected both ELLs and their teachers. She mentioned that now because of the merit pay, many teachers do not want to teach ELLs, as many teachers nowadays prefer to teach monolingual students instead, she detailed this whole problem stating,

It’s also not fair how the teachers are portrayed especially now with everything that’s happening in New Jersey with teachers and how they’re labeling us; and when it comes to you know merit pay, it’s very unfair. It’s very unfair for our students because nobody is gonna want them you know. Especially I’ve been teaching here for 10 years and as far as scheduling, I can say ok or maybe I wanna teach monolingual population now because if you’re gonna say I’m a horrible teacher because my ELLs are going up seven grade levels and still not enough for you, then I don’t want to be labeled as that, you know. So it creates this stigma

with the students, no one wants them and that's not fair, you know, that's not fair at all.

Teachers' responses suggest that there is a web of factors related to high-stakes state tests that limit ELLs' opportunities to achieve and to focus on their education. We can argue that mandated high-stakes state tests have reduced ELLs' academic experience to repeated failure, diminished self-esteem, and depression.

It is worth noting that in spite of the harsh life circumstances that many of the ELLs go through, most teachers stated that ELLs tend to have good attendance. Ms. Strongwater for instance pointed out, "my kids, my classes have excellent attendance." Similarly, Ms. Honest noted, "the attendance of our students overall is great." Ms. Bloomfield also shared both teachers' point of view, "I have no problem with their attendance. They all attend." Teachers also added that students do not only have good attendance during school time, but also most of them, if they can, attend the Saturday test preparation classes. This shows that ELLs are responsible and hard working group of students; a point that was emphasized by Ms. Honest, "our students work very hard."

On the other hand, Mr. Mitchel had a different experience with students' attendance; he stated, "we tend to have at least from the years of experience high percentage of our kids being out because a lot of kids need to work. They are much older; they have to help the family." His quotation, along with other teachers' responses, shows the level of stress and responsibilities that is thrown on these learners' shoulders at a very young age.

Micro Level Teachers' Responses regarding Testing Support

Results of this study showed that teachers are trying to do everything they can to help their ELLs pass the state test. Different teachers had different ways of preparing their students for the HSPA. However, most teachers stated that they start preparing their ELLs long before the HSPA test. Mr. Mitchel, a bilingual math teacher, mentioned "I start from September, I don't wait till the day of the test." Mr. Mitchel indicated that the way he prepares his ELLs for the HSPA is that "I try to assimilate the word, like ok this word in Spanish, this word is what it means in English, so when you see it you'll be able to address the question." He added that he tries to "reinforce keywords" and "terminology" as he believes this strategy improves ELLs' chances of passing the state test.

Both Ms. Bloomfield and Ms. Cushion, ESL math teachers, had almost the same preparation strategy. They indicated that their HSPA preparation for ELLs starts from September, from day one. They explained that they give students few questions every week to show them how to do it and then give them one question for homework as practice. They also mentioned that they keep doing this until the test in March and then after that they return back to their regular schedule. However, what Ms. Bloomfield do differently is that from January to the HSPA test in March, she makes her class totally geared towards HSPA preparation, "we stop what we're doing and all we do is HSPA until March." Ms. Bloomfield also added that she prepares ELLs by showing them "examples of how the questions will come in and what concept is they asking you for."

The ESL teachers, on the other hand, indicated that they try to get their ELLs prepared by giving them what Ms. Strongwater called, "the tips and tricks," while Ms.

Pratig called it “the techniques.” Ms. Strongwater stated that to prepare ELLs, you need to “do vocabulary, you do literary terms, you do comprehension, tips and tricks I call them. You do different kind of writing styles, you model, you practice, you make them do creative stuff.” Ms. Pratig also explained that,

We get them like prepared for all, like persuasive writing, we give them expository essays, we give them the techniques, how you’re supposed to write an expository essay...then we let them write an expository essay on that day. And then they do write persuasive essays and then we give them the readings.

Both teachers indicated that they do this for the whole year.

It is worth noting that teachers indicated that the mandated high-stakes state tests have made some teachers teach to the test and thus have affected the way they teach.

Because of the high-stakes consequences and the challenges mandated state tests present, teachers felt that they are under pressure to “teach to the test” as Ms. Cushion stated, “we have to speed up and do couple of other things that might not be on the agenda, and we have to just teach them certain things that we know are gonna be on the test.” Ms.

Bloomfield shared Ms. Cushion’s point of view, she mentioned “by January we stop what we’re doing and all we do is HSPA until March.” It seems that the strong emphasis on high-stakes state tests has led to a change in the way teachers teach, where what teachers teach has to be closely aligned to the tests in order to prepare students to pass.

Teachers also talked about the HSPA preparation classes that are offered on the five Saturdays before the HSPA test. Teachers stated that these classes are really helpful but at the same time they acknowledged that not all ELLs are able to make use of it as many of the ELLs have other responsibilities as Ms. Honest clarified,

As immigrant students they have responsibilities at home that probably you know our mainstream do not. Their parents need help, so that a lot of them work after school you know; so when it comes to attending after school programs maybe some do, some don't because of the responsibilities that they have at home and maybe that might take away of an extra hour that they can dedicate just to, you know, acquiring the language but it's hard, it's hard for them.

Micro Level Teachers' Responses regarding Testing Accommodations

Teacher interviewees reported that two testing accommodations are provided to ELLs, extra time, one and half the time for each section, and bilingual dictionaries. When asked if they believe these accommodations are helpful and enough by themselves, most teacher interviewees indicated that the testing accommodations provided to ELLs are not enough.

Extra time. Regarding the one and half the time that is provided to ELLs, Ms. Strongwater commented, "I don't get it, oh wow! They get extra time, you don't know the language, extra time is not gonna help you." Mr. Mitchel elaborated on this issue, "I look at it this way: does it mean because you're giving the kid extra time he's actually going to know the question? Even if it's two days; if the kid doesn't understand the question, he's not gonna answer the question. And you're wasting time looking through the dictionary."

These teachers' perspective is that extra time is not that helpful; they believe that if ELLs are "right off the boat" and are walking into a high-stakes test, having an hour and a half instead of an hour, is not going to make any difference. Ms. Cushion also shared their viewpoint,

If you didn't know it the first time you read it and you stay there an hour, how you're gonna still understand how to do the question if you don't understand it? I don't think that more time is gonna help. You can stay all day long and still don't know the answer.

She then explained that extra time would be helpful for slow students but not for ELLs, because if ELLs do not understand, then all the extra time they can get would not make a difference.

Bilingual dictionaries. Commenting on the bilingual dictionaries provided, Mr. Mitchel explained, "they are given dictionaries but that doesn't mean that a child understands what they don't." Mr. Mitchel then gives an example to clarify his point of view and to show why he believes the dictionary given to ELLs is not enough, "I can say write the coordinate plan and a kid looks at coordinate and he's still like what do you want me to do? Just simple terminology doesn't mean that the child can actually comprehend what you want, the objective." Ms. Strongwater continued the same thought, "they don't know every other word, dictionary is not gonna help them especially if it's a word to word dictionary versus a real dictionary." She then continued by criticizing the dictionaries used,

Ohhhh my God, what accommodations, come on. Really! Oh you can use a dictionary. Did you know it's a word-to-word dictionary and that the only word-to-word dictionary that is out there sucks? Not all the words are in there and some of the words that are in there, they've been absolutely nothing close to what it says it mean in the dictionary.

Ms. Pratig's story confirmed this accusation; Ms. Pratig's recalled a story about one of her students who came to her after the test and told her, "Miss this word is this and then he saw in the English dictionary saying something else and it was in my language different." Ms. Pratig then posed a question, "So how can I understand when I didn't get the meaning?" A question that our education officials need to answer.

Ms. Caffé summarized teachers' perspective on the uselessness of the accommodations given, she stated "they have dictionaries, they have time, but if you don't know then all that time and the dictionaries in the world is not gonna help you, you know." It is worth noting that although there seem to be a consensus among teacher participants on the uselessness of the testing accommodations provided to ELLs, some ELL participants in this study considered the accommodations provided somewhat helpful, as will be discussed later.

Micro Level Teachers' Responses regarding Impact of HSPA on ELLs

Psychological impact

Stressed out. Teacher interviewees shared that the HSPA had a negative psychological impact on ELLs. Participants believed that ELLs are greatly being emotionally affected by taking the HSPA; Ms. Honest described the impact of the HSPA on ELLs, "it really hurts them, it makes them anxious and its torture, it's not fair you know." She then recounted a true story to show the impact of the test on the students,

I mean I had students, who came on a Tuesday, true story, and they're sitting in front of me and they're asking what do I do, and all I have to do is say "here", I can't say anything else. With tears in their eyes, you know, they have to take this test and they're hurt by it.

Ms. Strongwater emphasized the same point, she referred to a similar story,

I have a student...he was in my HSPA testing room, in the first seat, in the first row and I'm like 'hi, how are you?' and he is like 'no English' and I'm like 'you're taking the HSPA today' and he is 'no English.' He had been here a week before he has to take the HSPA test.

Likewise, Ms. Pratig described ELLs during the HSPA time as "really worried. I see mostly like students very worried. Moreover, most teachers described how ELLs feel during the HSPA time as "stressed out." Mr. Mitchel indicated that "it's stressful for them, it's very stressful" and Ms. Strongwater had a similar opinion, she stated, "it stresses them out, it stresses them out, even the students that are really good students."

Ms. Cushion also pointed out that ELLs "get very upset because it's a lot of stress for them; it's stressful."

Mr. Mitchel shared his reasons why he believes these state tests make ELLs stressed, he mentioned, "it's very stressful because they walk in, then they get the results, obviously a lot of them did not pass, and they feel they haven't achieved anything." Ms. Pratig had another reason for why students get worried; she believes,

they are always worried because they have a family pressure on them, what if they fail. And also what if they pass by taking it in their own language? Will it affect them when they go to college; they will think I passed in my language.

Ms. Cushion, on the other hand, indicated that students feel sad and upset because of the vicious circle the state test throws them in, she described ELLs' dilemma,

They get very upset because it's a lot of stress for them; it's stressful...they know they're gonna fail. They feel bad because they fail; then they make them take it

again, and plus we have AHSA where they make them in-between take it again, they have to go to AHSA class every morning usually like zero period which is like before class, 6:45 in the morning, they go to AHSA class till 8:30; have to practice again and then they have to take the test again. So it gives them some extra pressure because they're doing more tasks because they're trying to get them to pass because they need it for graduation. It's terrible because then their schedule changes and we have to do different things and it's really hard for them. And they know they're not gonna pass it anyway.

Ms. Cushion's comment matches the same point of view as some of the ELLs, as will be discussed later. Ms. Honest also discussed this same viewpoint,

That's another thing, you know, to take the test, then the AHSA, then they take the test again and then they do the AHSA again and a lot of them complete all of their classes, complete their curriculum and they're in a limbo because they can't graduate because of the test.

Study findings showed that many ELLs find themselves in a vicious circle because of the mandated state tests; there is not enough time between the tests, they finish one and find out they need to take another soon.

Self-esteem. Furthermore, teachers discussed how failing the HSPA negatively affects students' self-esteem. Ms. Strongwater clearly portrayed how the test affects students' self-esteem, "and then the kids that you know, the tough guys that maybe don't have the academic preparation, you hurt their self-esteem more, and when your self-esteem is in the toilet, you do stupid stuff." Ms. Strongwater then explained that the current system has devastating consequences on ELLs, she stated,

you wanna keep pushing them to join gangs, you wanna keep pushing them to drop out and just work at jobs that are gonna break their backs for the rest of their lives. You believe this kind of education is gonna put them where they need to be, keep doing what you're doing.

Results show that some teachers may have negative opinion about what is happening to ELLs because of the educational policies and practices used.

Academic impact. In addition to the negative psychological impact, teachers also reported serious academic consequences to not passing the test. Students who fail to pass the state test will not be able to graduate from high school or get a high school diploma, and so will not be able to go to college. Mr. Mitchel in his quotation indicated that some students even drop out school because of the state test, “lots of these kids stressed, stressed to a level that really sometimes drop out of school.” He then gave reasons for why he believes these students go this far and take this action, he said “because they look at it, I’m never gonna pass. I’m a senior and how many more times do I have to take this and some of them do leave.” Mr. Mitchel then confirmed his story by stating, “I have seen students that have dropped out and left the district because of that.”

Ms. Strongwater confirmed Mr. Mitchel’s viewpoint, she emphasized that ELLs “drop out because of the test, they drop out because of the frustration, just a general frustration of the whole system.” She then explained that if we want the dropout numbers to get better then we have to deal with the real problem that is causing it. It is definitely so sad that some ELLs may decide to end their academic future and close the door on their dreams because of the mandated high-stakes state test which according to Ms.

Honest's view "there're many things that the test does that are completely illegal. And they're still giving them that test." These devastating consequences should be a red light for policy makers to thoroughly investigate the assessment policy for ELLs.

Micro Level Teachers' Responses regarding Testing Recommendations

Teachers presented several recommendations for improving the assessment practices for ELLs. In their testing recommendations, many teachers emphasized the importance of having a test that is designed specifically for ELLs; as Ms. Strongwater mentioned, "there should be like an ESL test." If this is not a possible option, then several teachers asked that ELLs should have the chance to take the HSPA in their native languages, these teachers believe that ELLs would do much better on the state test if they take it in their native languages. Mr. Mitchel emphasized this viewpoint, "give the kids first test in their native language, see how they score, then if a child does achieve the objective, then you go to the other formats and at the same time reinforce the English part." He added that only then, "you'll get a true assessment right off the bat of the child's math skills."

Ms. Cushion, a math teacher, proposed certain accommodations which she believes would be helpful for ELLs, she mentioned "prepare a test on their level or prepare a test with the vocabulary that they know." Ms. Cushion suggested having a test that is on students' English proficiency level, a test that has no difficult words that students did not learn yet.

The responses of the teacher interviewees show that ELLs low performance on the statewide tests may greatly be due to the fact that they are required to pass high-stakes assessments in English before they have developed the linguistic ability to do so. Based

on this viewpoint, Ms. Pratig advised to give ELLs

some years to learn language and then put them into HSPA. Don't give them

HSPA immediately. At least for three years they should learn and they should be

able to understand and then they should be given HSPA, not the next day.

This viewpoint was a recommendation by a number of the survey participant teachers as well.

Teachers also offered other solutions regarding the testing practices for ELLs which they believed would be helpful. For instance, Ms. Strongwater had several recommendations. She suggested using the ACCESS test with the ELLs instead of the HSPA. Another recommendation was to have two forms of HSPA, one for the native English-speaking students who have lived in the U.S. all their lives and another form, an easier one, for ELLs. Ms. Honest had a similar suggestion, she believed that the ACCESS "does a good job, maybe the ACCESS test could take the place of the HSPA." Among her other recommendations was "a different HSPA test depending on the level." After giving several assessment options, Ms. Honest then argued that the HSPA is not an appropriate assessment tool for ELLs and so, "they shouldn't have to take the test if the law and the research says that it takes them 6 years to acquire the language. If you don't have 6 years then you can't, you can't."

On the other hand, Ms. Caffé indicated that she understands that there should be some kind of a test, however, she claimed that the topics used are not suitable for ELLs,

Well you have to pass some kind of a test to graduate but you have to alter it a

little bit, either change the topic or, they have to change the topic, I think that's

what I would do...It has to be something with a little more they're familiar with and then I think they'll be ok.

Ms. Caffé brought up an important issue that was discussed earlier; the disconnect between the topics used in the test and ELLs' lives. Ms. Caffé also complained about the delay in the score reporting, she stated "they just took HSPA in October, we did not get the scores; they don't give them the scores until very late." Ms. Caffé requested that the scores be released earlier so that the teachers could use it to work on students' weak points, "scores should be sooner and then we could take that and work on it. They wait too long to give them the results." This is a very important point as it shows that state officials do not acknowledge that test scores should be used to guide instruction. Another consequence is that many senior students once they are done with the HSPA find themselves in a situation where they should get ready for the AHSA because they do not know if they have passed the HSPA or not until very late; this puts more load on these students.

Ms. Bloomfield had a different set of suggestions regarding the testing accommodations provided to ELLs; she advised that providing students with "digital dictionaries" would be more helpful than the useless bilingual dictionaries that do not have "the mathematical words." She claimed that the digital dictionaries would solve this problem as "the math vocabulary, they're not gonna find it in any dictionary. This is only like in math books. But the digital would be like a worldwide so that they could know what each one means." This point of view confirms Mr. Mitchel's story about not finding the correct meaning of the math terms in the word-to-word dictionaries.

These results suggest that ELLs with low English-proficiency skills need something more than what is provided to help them deal with the linguistic demand of the mandated state test. Some teacher participants requested a special test for ELLs while others asked for a test in simple English without all the difficult vocabulary that most ELLs are not aware of, while some asked for digital dictionaries. Other participants believe that ELLs could have benefited more if they had been assessed in their native languages in addition to English while others wished the test had different topics that ELLs could relate to. In other words, teacher interviewees believed that ELLs could have used some language assistance or access to another translation option.

Micro Level

ELLs' Interview Results

This section presents the results of the data analysis of the interviews with 10 ELLs from one school in New Jersey.

Characteristics of ELL Interviewees

The study used interviews as a source of data collection. Interviews were conducted with 10 high school ELL students (Appendix C) at Seabed High School in the fall of 2013 (all names in this study are pseudonyms, for purposes of confidentiality).

Table (18) presents students' participants characteristics.

Table 18

Characteristics of ELL Student Interviewees

Name (pseudo)	Gender	Native Country	ESL level	Years in U.S.	No. of Math attempts	No. of LA attempts
Marina	F	Egypt	ESL 4/ Exit	3 years	2 (not yet)	2 (not yet)
Herang	M	India	ESL 4/ Exit	1<	2 (not yet)	1
Usha	F	India	ESL 4/ Exit	2 & ½	2 (not yet)	1
Maha	F	Egypt	ESL 4/ Exit	3 years	2 (not yet)	1
Pria	F	India	ESL 4/ Exit	4 years	1	1
Youssef	M	Egypt	ESL 4/ Exit	4 years	2 (not yet)	2 (not yet)
Carmen	F	DR	ESL 4/ Exit	2 years	2 (not yet)	1
José	M	Mexico	ESL 4/ Exit	2 years	2 (not yet)	2 (not yet)
Mina	M	Egypt	ESL 4 /Exit	3 years	2 (not yet)	2 (not yet)
Mark	M	Egypt	Exited ESL	4 years	1	3

“Not yet” indicates that a student took the test but the result was not out yet during the interview time.

The students’ participants in this study were ten ELLs; three Indians (Herang, Usha, and Pria), two Hispanics (Carmen from Dominican Republic and José from Mexico), and five Egyptians (Marina, Maha, Youssef, Mina, and Mark). Regarding the number of years participants have been in the U.S., it ranged from less than one year to four years; with 90% of the students indicated that they have been in the country for two years or more. Only one student, Herang, had been in the U.S. for less than one year. Concerning students’ ESL level, all student interviewees, except Mark who already exited the ESL program and graduated, were seniors and were in ESL4/ Exit level.

ESL4/ Exit is the last level in the ESL program at Seabed High school and so it is also called exit level as students will not need to go to ESL classes anymore but can join regular mainstream English classes afterwards.

For the number of attempts students needed to pass the HSPA, 80% of the students had to take the HSPA math section two times; till the time of the interview in December 2013. At the time of the interview, the results were not out yet so students did not know if they passed or not. Therefore, their results are shown in the table as “not yet.” Regarding the HSPA language arts section, 50% of the ELL student interviewees passed it on the first attempt, 40% had to take it 2 times and the results were not out yet at the time of the interview. However, one student, Mark, had to take the test 3 times and the AHSA one time and then he passed through the state appeal.

Statewide Test: Fair or Unfair Test for ELLs?

This section depicts students’ perspectives on the mandated high-stakes state test (HSPA); whether they consider it as a fair or an unfair test, and their reasons for such point of view. ELLs’ views matched to a great extent the perspective of the study teacher participants.

One test decides your future. Students questioned the validity of the HSPA. Herang, for instance, argued against the HSPA “I don’t think that they can judge the students for just one test because maybe they can do better on some other test.” Herang in these few words described the dilemma of many ELLs, “they can do better on some other test,” but the shocking fact is that even if ELLs do well on other tests, unfortunately, that would not count as was clearly stated by Maha,

I know some people that had to take the HSPA like three times, four times to

graduate. And even though you did a really good job in classes and you got A's and B's, but you still don't know what's gonna happen to you if you fail the HSPA because you're gonna take it again and fail again, you take it again. And people try to go, try it again and again, but they still fail.

That is one of the main reasons why Herang and Maha, among many others, consider the HSPA as an unfair test; unfair to judge students and to decide their future on just how well they do on this one test as Maha stated "basically your future is pending on just passing this test." It is clear that the only thing that counts is the student score on the state test, if students want to graduate and have a high school diploma, they must pass this mandated high-stakes state test.

Unfamiliarity with state tests. Student interviewees also added more reasons for why they believe it is unfair to take these high-stakes standardized tests. Some students explained that the problem is that in their countries they did not have to take these kind of tests as Herang explained, "You know in other countries, they don't have like this;" and so students felt uncertain when they found out that they have to take this HSPA test for the first time as Carmen's quotation showed, "In our country, you don't have to take these tests. You're facing something that you don't know." Mark had a similar point of view "I didn't have any background about what I was going to face in here." This was the exact case with Herang who just arrived into the country and found out that he has to sit for the HSPA the following week, with no preparation at all, "I came late in the school so as soon as I came in the school in February so next Monday I has HSPA."

It is clear from the students, who come from different countries and backgrounds, that many ELLs may be totally unprepared and unfamiliar with these standardized state

tests as they were never faced with these kind of tests in their countries. Moreover, many ELLs may be unaware of the format of the test as well as the kind of language that is used in these state tests, and so they find themselves faced with the fact that they are required to take these high-stakes tests regardless of their situation; for many it is a sink-sink situation. It seems that only very few ELLs may have a chance of passing the HSPA the first time, those who Mark describes as “the people who were in private and English schools in their home countries;” as is the case with Usha who passed the HSPA language arts section from the first time because as she reiterated, “I’ve been taking English since my birth.” On the other hand, the majority of newcomer ELLs, who have not learned English back in their countries and who are unfamiliar with the standardized state test system have a very slim chance of passing this test from the first time.

Limited linguistic proficiency. Moreover, ELLs shared more thoughts regarding why they consider the HSPA as an unfair test for ELLs; students commented, “It’s not fair to take a test like native speakers.” ELLs believed that it is not fair to compare their performance to that of native English speaking students, who have been in the country all their lives. Carmen stated, “It’s not fair because they know the language and we don’t. That’s a problem I think. It’s not fair.” Jose added more details, “It’s not fair that we have to take the same test that other American students does because you know we don’t... I don’t speak the language that well and I don’t write it that well too, so it’s a little bit harder for me.” Maha also summarized why many ELLs consider the HSPA a hard and an unfair test,

It’s kind of hard ... because the fact that you’re taking the HSPA test is just basically you’re taking it on the stuff that you’ve been knowing since the first

year like in school; since you're in kindergarten. Because basically your first 2, 3 years in school you take vocabulary words. You learn how to write, you learn how to read perfectly, right? But when you come from a different country that you've been there for over 16 years and maybe more or less, whatever it doesn't matter, but the fact that you've come here for a year or two, just you have to face the fact that you have to take this test, that's the hard part about it. It's just hard because it's like you have to study and learn how to read and write in a really short period of time when other people that have been here for the first day of their lives, like you know, they already know what's going on; but for us, it's just hard.

It seems from student participants' comments that the ELLs are aware of their language limitations, but not the state officials.

Same test-diluted materials. The student interviewees in this study also shared that it is not fair to take a test like native English speakers as some of them believe that being in ESL classes does not expose them to the same full range of vocabulary and strong materials covered in the state tests as their colleagues in regular mainstream English classes. Such viewpoint was shared by Mark who stated, "When I came to the school, they placed me in ESL, and they don't give anything related to the HSPA in the ESL, just once in a blue moon." He then added, "In ESL, we don't come out with even two new words every day."

It seems that some ELLs believed that the type of preparation they receive in the ESL program, in the form of simple English and diluted materials, limit their abilities

while at the same time they are required to take the same high-stakes tests and to get the same score as their native-English speaking peers in order to pass as Usha clarified,

like the literature art classes people, they have hard like kind of books that they have like a lot of words, the meanings and everything so it's kind of different but then for us, it's like they make it easy for us so that we can understand what it means.

She then added that since ELLs take diluted materials, the test is usually harder for them than students in mainstream classes. She also added that as a result, “Not a lot of them pass.” Students’ responses show that some ELLs believe that being in ESL classes may create some difficulties for ELLs, a viewpoint that is not supported by research.

It is also clear that the ELL interviewees are not just complaining and trying to find excuses for their low performance on the high-stakes state tests. On the contrary, they are aware of their problems and the challenges they face when taking these state tests. ELLs gave reasonable reasons for why they believe these tests are unfair as they clearly explained that their language skills are not as developed as their native English-speaking peers and so it is hard to do well on these tests that are in part language proficiency tests besides being content knowledge tests.

ELLs’ Major Challenges with the State Test

Vocabulary a major obstacle. Besides the reasons that ELL interviewees gave for why they believe the HSPA is an unfair test, ELLs shared their viewpoints regarding their major challenges with the mandated statewide test. Student interviewees shared their teachers’ viewpoint as they also identified difficult vocabulary as one of the main difficulties encountered in the HSPA by ELLs. Students complained of the

overwhelming amount of difficult vocabulary used in the HSPA, as is clear in Herang's complaint "a lot of hard words;" Jose also commented on his challenge with the vocabulary, "It was hard like to understand like what the words meant." Mina also expressed the same idea, "very difficult vocabulary that you don't understand." Similarly, Pria identified the major challenge that ELLs have with the HSPA, "The words that they have in the HSPA, the long words that they couldn't understand." This huge amount of difficult vocabulary that the ELLs do not know interferes with their understanding and so makes it hard for them to grasp the meaning of what they are reading. The results of the ELLs' interview responses suggest that the overwhelming amount of difficult vocabulary was a major obstacle to ELLs' performance on the HSPA.

The vocabulary problem did not only affect ELLs' performance on the language section only, but extended to the math section of the HSPA as well. Students pointed out that they do not have a problem with the computation skills but because of the difficult vocabulary words and the language complexity of the test items, especially the word problems, many of them do not pass. It is worth noting that this point of view was also endorsed by teacher survey participants as well as math teacher interviewees. Youssef's quotation highlights this viewpoint,

For me, it's just the language, you know. That's the only, that's the only one reason. I'm really good at math but because in the HSPA all the questions are like I can't understand them, you know, their language I can't understand them.

Herang also expressed the same idea, "The equations are pretty much easy but the statements, some are very hard."

Likewise, Mina shared his viewpoint regarding how the difficult vocabulary used

in the math problems interferes with students' understanding:

The math skills, no problem, but also there are very difficult vocabulary that you don't understand ... There are some hard vocabulary words in the multiple choice questions and if you don't understand the meaning of these words, you won't be able to solve the problem.

Carmen had a similar viewpoint, "For math, it's just hard words and I couldn't understand it." Maha also talked about the difficult vocabulary in the math problems and that although she tried to understand it, she could not deal with it; she stated, "When I took the math, I didn't answer the open-ended questions because most of the time I don't understand the problems, like the word questions." She then ended her quote by saying "it was really hard for me. I was, alright, fine, I can't do this anymore. I have to let them. I can't answer, I can't just put anything." Students' responses show that the language complexity of the test items presented enormous challenges for them.

Moreover, students' responses showed that the challenge with the vocabulary is not only related to the reading texts and math problems but is extended to include the writing section as well. They complained that they are required to explain in English the steps they used in order to solve the math problems, and that if they do not do that, they lose points. Mina talked about his struggle with the open-ended questions; he believed that the open-ended questions were one of the main reasons he failed math, "What makes me fail is the open-ended. The questions are ok, I mean the multiple-choice questions but for the open-ended we have to solve the problem and write down the steps and this was a big problem for me." Carmen elaborated more on this issue, "For math, if you do the problem right and you just don't know how to explain how you did it, they take a lot of

points off; so it's not good." Students indicated that even if they were able to solve the word problem, it was hard for them to find the right words to explain how they solved it.

Students' responses show that the main complaint is about the difficulty of the vocabulary words used in the test items and not the mathematics computation skills. Moreover, these students' words send us a message that they may not be having a problem with the content, what the test is supposedly measuring, but instead they are having a problem with the language and the words used. Their words prompt us to question what the statewide tests measure and whether the performance on these tests depends on the student's English language proficiency level.

Reading passage. Besides the overwhelming amount of difficult vocabulary used in the state tests, ELL interviewees identified "the length of the reading passage" as "a big problem" and thus a challenge to doing well on that test. Students criticized the unrealistic length of the reading passage, an issue that was brought up earlier by Ms. Strongwater. Marina complained, "it's a long story, is so hard and we do not have time to read all the story." Mark also had a similar point of view, "The reading passage is very long, four pages long; the words used are very hard." Herang described his struggle with the reading passage using intense words, "The reading is like puzzling. Like they give us a story, like you read it and then you say like what's the story? It's difficult like puzzling story. It's not good. I don't like the story. It has a lot of hard words." Mina also clearly summarized his classmates' challenge with the reading passage,

The problem with this test is the reading passage. The story is a four page long and you have to read the entire story and try to understand it very well in order to be able to answer the questions. It's four pages and sometimes it includes many

difficult vocabulary words.

Students' responses show that ELLs have to deal with very long reading passages that are packed with an overwhelming amount of difficult vocabulary; they need to read the entire story and understand it in order to be able to answer the questions; another category for students' complaints.

Students also complained about the difficulty of the questions of the reading passage. They described how sometimes it is almost impossible for them to find the answers to these questions as Marina described, "the hard is the questions for the story, the open-ended. We not gonna, we not find the answer in the story. This is the hard." Youssef, likewise, described his challenge with the two open-ended questions of the reading passage, "like they are not even in the story. When I read the story, I read the story like hundred time again to answer these two questions, I don't find the answer. I feel like they've given us weird questions." Mark also had a similar experience with the open-ended questions; he shared his experience of taking the HSPA test for three times,

I knew that I wouldn't understand the story and that I'll spend a very long time trying to find the answers for the open-ended questions and that I'll end by not finding the answer, so I just put any answer from the story.

Students also expressed their concern regarding the vague and confusing test items used in the HSPA, Herang, for instance, described the test as "puzzling." Similarly, Pria, although she believes that she is good at English, still described her experience with the test as "sometimes, I just get confused with this test and everything, so it is sometimes so hard for me and I just can't do it." Carmen, on the other hand, believes that "they try to confuse you." Likewise, Mark considered the questions "very confusing and vague;

they are not specific.” Similarly, Youssef described the test as having “weird questions.” Students’ responses suggest that there is consensus among ELLs that the HSPA questions are confusing and not straightforward, a point of view that was confirmed by teachers’ comments as well.

ELLs’ Responses regarding Testing Support

ESL classes. There was some disagreement among students as to whether ESL classes are a burden or a benefit. However, some student interviewees took the position that ESL classes should be used only in limited ways to assist students. Some students cautioned that placing ELLs in ESL classes rather than mainstream classes limits their abilities as they are given simple English and are not exposed to the full range of vocabulary and strong materials as their colleagues in regular English classes. However, ELLs are still required to take the same high-stakes state tests and get same score as their native English-speaking peers in order to pass. Usha reflects on this issue,

They have hard like kind of books that they have like a lot of words... I think it’s gonna be because they make it easy for us, for ESL students, so I think it’s kind of hard for us other than the other people. Not a lot of them pass.

Mark also had a similar point of view, he claims that the ESL classes are not helpful and he goes to the point of warning other ELLs not to stay in ESL classes and to get out of it as soon as possible. He stated,

they don’t give anything related to the HSPA in the ESL...When I go now to school and anyone tells me that he’s staying in ESL to get extra time, I always advise them not to do so but to leave ESL...because the ESL doesn’t teach anything related to the HSPA.

Students' responses show that some ELLs believe that ESL classes create difficulties for ELLs. Nevertheless, others believe that ESL classes are helpful and that the teachers there help them, such as Herang who stated, "but here, they will help us in ESL 4 and Ms. Strongwater, she's a very nice teacher. She help a lot."

In class preparation. Results of students' interviews showed that in class preparation for the HSPA varies from one teacher to the other. Students cited different ways in which their teachers prepare them. For instance, Pria stated, "they tell us like the examples of HSPA, like they tell us how it comes and like what we should be stay focus on." Carmen added, "she talks about like open-ended questions and how we can, like how we can have a perfect part of, like we can compare the things that we learn reading and just with our life." While Usha stated that her teacher gives them "do and don'ts, like some sentences and verbs and you have to correct them so you have to find which verb is correct. You have to correct some grammars and everything."

Marina and Mina shared similar perspectives regarding HSPA preparation, Marina stated "they give us the book for HSPA and teach us the reading and writing the essay," while Mina added, "the English teacher make us write a lot of essays." Youssef, on the other hand, mentioned that he did not get any preparation for the HSPA in the ESL class.

Regarding math, students' responses showed that most math teachers do not provide ELLs with real preparation for the HSPA. Marina reported no preparation whatsoever for the HSPA math. Herang, on the other hand, mentioned that HSPA math preparation is limited to "some papers, paperwork and they say just practice and do." Similarly, Carmen commented that her math teacher just gives "big packet of problems

and we have to try and then she explain them to us and we just learn the formulas and stuff.”

Youssef, on the other hand, stated that he did not get any practice in the math except in the zero period. Mina had a different experience, he mentioned that for students who had two periods of math, one period would be math and the other would be dedicated to HSPA preparation. Students’ responses show that the quality of the HSPA preparation that students get greatly depends on the teacher.

Inconvenience of support programs to some ELLs. ELLs are offered help and testing support in preparation for the HSPA in the form of a zero period and Saturday classes that are offered for five consecutive weeks just before the HSPA test. Students who were able to attend the Saturday classes, reported that the classes were helpful. Pria, for instance, gave credit to this Saturday program for passing the HSPA, she asserted, “Yeah, it was helpful. That’s why I passed my HSPA.” On the other hand, some ELLs shared their thoughts regarding the inconvenience of these test support programs. Some students complained that the zero period as well as the Saturday classes are inconvenient to them because of their work schedule, a point that was also discussed by some of the teacher participants. Many ELLs have other responsibilities, they work till late night and on weekends to help their families so it is hard for some of them to attend these test support programs. Mina, on the other hand, had a different reason for not attending these classes; he stated, “I don’t go because I’m doing wrestling” and so the classes are held during sports’ practice time.

ELLs’ Responses regarding Testing Accommodations

Student participants reported that two testing accommodations are provided to

ELLs: extended testing time (one and half the time for each section) and bilingual dictionaries. Students identified the accommodations provided as helpful but not enough.

Extra time. When ELLs were asked if the extra time is helpful, students had different views. On one hand, Pria, Usha and Carmen mentioned that the extra time provided was helpful. Maha, on the other hand, believed that the time was enough for her but not enough for many other ELLs, “for me it was, but for some other people, it wasn’t.” The reason she gave was that “some people, they don’t understand what they’re reading so it takes longer time to read each every word to understand what was going on.” Youssef shared Maha’s viewpoint, he commented, “it is enough, but for some people it is not enough because some people do not even understand a word. A lot of them do not understand anything.”

Nevertheless, some ELLs believed that the extra time was not enough. For instance, Marina stated that she felt that the time was enough for English but not for math. Herang, instead, believed that extra time in general was not enough, “the time is like a bit low, they should give us like more time, a little bit more time.” Jose presented reasons for why ELLs need extra time; he pointed out that ELLs need more time “because if we don’t understand some words, we have to look for them in the dictionary so that takes like time.” Yet, Mark took a different stance, he believed that the extra time “doesn’t make any difference at all. It’s of no use.” Students’ responses in general showed that although extra time might be helpful for some, it was still not enough; students needed extra accommodations.

Bilingual dictionary. Student interviewees’ responses also showed that they

were not satisfied with the bilingual dictionaries provided, an allowed accommodation for ELLs. Students had several reasons for their dissatisfaction. Some ELLs such as Pria, Mark and Marina complained that “not all words are there” in the dictionary. Carmen also shared her fellow students’ viewpoint; she criticized, “sometimes you look at them in the dictionary and you cannot find them; like they are so hard.” Students’ quotes seem to suggest that one of the challenges that ELLs faced with the state test was that they were not able to find some of the words in their bilingual dictionaries.

On the other hand, Herang commented that he did not use the bilingual dictionary because of the time constraint; he stated that the time was very tight and so there was not enough time to look up the words in the dictionary. Whereas Mina argued that he did not use the dictionary, as he believes that “the dictionary wastes a lot of time.” He claimed that the reading passage was very long and was full of many difficult words, so he felt it would be a waste of time to use the dictionary to look up all these words. Mark confirmed Mina’s point of view; he argued, “if you used the dictionary, you won’t have enough time to finish the test.”

Youssef identified an important issue; he explained that his reason for not using the dictionary is “because I don’t understand a word from the dictionary. The Arabic is like so weird in the dictionary... I don’t even understand a word in the dictionary. It’s so weird.” On further investigation, it appeared that although most of the Arabic speaking ELLs were Egyptians, the bilingual dictionaries used were Lebanese, a different Arabic dialect that many Egyptian students find hard to understand. Students also shared that the bilingual dictionaries provided in the test were not the same as the ones they use in their classes.

The consensus view seems to be that although the provided accommodations are helpful to some extent, they are not enough by themselves. Students had some suggestions for extra accommodations that they believe would be more helpful, such as having a test that is designed specifically for ELLs, testing students in their own language, making the passing score 150 instead of 200, and giving students more time before requiring them to sit for the test. Students also recommended having an easier test with less difficult vocabulary, shorter reading passages, less complicated test items, and specific straightforward questions.

ELLs' Responses regarding Impact of the State Test on ELLs

Psychological/ Emotional impact.

Before and during the HSPA time. Student interviewees expressed that the HSPA has a huge psychological impact on ELLs. They believe that many ELLs are greatly being emotionally affected by taking the HSPA. Most of the student participants in this study described themselves as feeling “scared,” “nervous,” and “stressed out” during the HSPA time and they stated that this is how their friends feel as well.

Some of the reasons that student interviewees mentioned for feeling scared and nervous were that they knew that if they did not pass, they would not be able to graduate or get a high school diploma and thus would not be able to go to college. Other reasons included, students' low English language proficiency and the pressure that arises from having to pass this test as part of the graduation requirement.

Due to the stress ELLs go through, many do not expect to pass the first time they take the HSPA and that was clear in ELL participants' responses when they were asked about how long does it usually take ELLs to pass the HSPA. Many of them replied that

only few people pass from the first time as was clear in Youssef's words, "sometimes they pass from the second time, some of them pass from the third." Usha also commented that, "it will always be hard for anyone of us if you take the first time, so I think it's 2 or 3 times."

Students' responses showed that it usually takes many ELLs two to three trials to pass the state test; this case was clear in this study's participants where 9 out of the 10 ELL interviewees needed more than one trial, either in one of the HSPA sections or on both sections, to pass. Moreover, Mark's own story as well as Carmen's recount about her friend who had to take the HSPA several times, show that some ELLs even had to take these tests more than 3 times in order to pass. Both Mark and Carmen's friend passed on the last chance they had.

After the HSPA. Students' responses revealed that they were not only psychologically affected before or during taking the HSPA, they were in fact more disturbed after the results came out and they knew that they did not pass the mandated statewide test. Students' stories showed how failing the state test negatively affected their self-esteem. When asked about how they felt when they knew that they have failed the state test, students mentioned that they felt "bad," "sad" and "depressed." Carmen stated, "I feel bad because I try and I didn't." Herang, on the other hand, discussed how ELLs' in general feel, "they try but they can't pass and they don't graduate. It's not good." Students' words show how disappointed they get because though they did their best, they still did not pass.

Furthermore, Herang brought up another important point, the peer pressure that some of the ELLs go through; he explicitly described how if there are two friends and

one passes the state test and the other does not, the student who passed would see the other as “dumb, he don’t do well, he’s not good in anything,” Herang added that the student who passed “feel unequal and like they are better and some kids show off, like I pass and they laugh or fun, like you don’t do well, you don’t know Math, you don’t know English.”

Students also mentioned that many ELLs feel depressed and confused because of these high-stakes tests as was clear in several students’ responses. Maha reported that “they get depressed” while Usha expressed “I just get confused with this test and everything.” Youssef also had a similar comment, “I feel like I’m so confused.” One important reason for students’ negative feelings is that they know that their future is pending on this test and they do not know what to do; they find themselves in a vicious circle. This idea was clearly summarized by Maha, “basically your future is pending on just passing this test. Even if you don’t want to go to college, but if you wanna get out of high school without dropping out, you have to pass the HSPA. Herang, in one of his statements, expressed how ELLs feel in general, he said,

If they don’t pass HSPA, like they will go like in depression sometime because they don’t. They feel like everyone is graduating and just because they fail one test, they miss the chance, but if they took again and again so it’s hard for them and they feel bad for themselves, like they are nothing.

Herang’s statement describes the bitter feeling that many ELLs feel when they find themselves left out while their colleagues are graduating and they do not know where they are going to end. This feeling of worthlessness and not being good for anything hurt these vulnerable beings.

This idea was emphasized in some of the stories stated by student interviewees about themselves and their friends; as in the story that Carmen recounted about her friend who had to take the HSPA several times,

our friend have to take it many times. He passed it in the last turn he had, like he weren't going to have more chances to take the HSPA and I don't know how he passed the last time he took it.

Carmen does not know how her friend was able to cope with all this stress and was able to pass in the last chance he had.

Mark's story revealed another aspect of the stress that some of the ELLs go through because of these high-stakes state test. Mark's story clearly portrayed the consequences of not passing the HSPA and the stressful moments some ELLs go through not knowing if they were going to graduate or not. In Mark's case, he did not know if he was going to graduate or not until "3 pm the day before graduation." Mark clearly and vividly painted ELLs' dilemma and the challenges they go through,

In the senior year, the period between the tests, both the HSPA and the AHSA, is very short, you find yourself taking 6 or 7 tests in a very short period of time. You just finish one test and they tell you there's another test the following week. So you don't have time to catch your breath between all these tests. Add to this that you're working at this time as well, you have to take the SAT, and you're visiting and applying for college. So you find yourself in a very tight and stressful situation. You find the entire year is just about taking tests, you don't learn anything, you just have to take tests and that's it.

Mark's viewpoint was also expressed by some of the teachers. It is quite clear from the

students' responses that the time during which the students take the state test is a very tough time for many of them. This is the emotional atmosphere in which the ELLs have to take the test and are required to demonstrate their content knowledge in English. It seems that all what ELLs can do is what José suggested, "the most that we can do is try the best we can." In conclusion, the results of the analysis of the ELLs' interviews indicate that we are placing a huge psychological load on these young learners.

Academic impact. Besides having negative psychological impact on ELLs, mandated state tests also have a great academic impact on students. Although it can be argued that some students may be unaware of the intended purpose of the high-stakes tests, all student interviewees on the other hand, are very aware of the academic consequences of not passing the statewide test. It was very clear that all student participants knew that passing these tests was a requirement to graduate from high school and that if they do not pass, they would not graduate, get a high school diploma, go to college, or pursue their future dreams. This was one of the reasons for being stressed out and depressed.

Students' responses revealed that they were quite aware of the consequences of not passing the state test. For instance, Youssef commented, "I know if I failed, I cannot graduate." Herang was more concerned about going to college, so he elaborated on this point talking about ELLs, "if they didn't pass it, they didn't get graduation and like go in college. They didn't go in college."

Moreover, ELLs understood that if they do not pass, they have to keep retaking these tests until they pass, as Jose stated, "you have to do good because it's the way that you can graduate from the high school and if you don't do good, you have to take it again

until you pass.” Likewise, another reason for ELL interviewees’ frustration with these tests is that they understand that if they do not pass, they will have to restudy again for this same test and they will not be able to focus on studying for other classes or other tests like the SAT as Mina mentioned,

Since I failed by few points I have to restudy all over again and so I won’t be able to focus on my other studying for the new year since I have to focus more on studying to pass the HSPA or AHSA. In addition, there is another test, the SAT which I didn’t pay much attention to since I decided to focus first on getting the high school diploma. And I feel bored and scared because I want to do well, I want to score higher than 200.

Students’ responses clearly showed that the time during which the students take the HSPA is a very tough time for them. They get nervous and stressed out. Students were stressed out because they knew that they needed to pass the HSPA in order to graduate from the high school. Unfortunately, not all students were able to cope with this stress. Some student participants talked about how some of their friends just decided to drop out of school because they felt they could not go through this whole test process. This was clear in the story Maha shared regarding some of her colleagues,

I know people like dropped off because just the fact that you have to go through all that. So you just don’t do it. Basically like you wanna go on in your life. You wanna have a better future. You wanna do this, you wanna do that. But you can’t do that unless you pass the HSPA so that you can graduate from high school and have diploma and go to college with that diploma. So that’s the only thing. You know what I’m talking about. They get depressed. Oh yeah, I failed the test so

now I can't go on with my future. Now I can't be this, I can't be that. All my plans are messed up.

Mark also spoke about how one of his colleagues, was kicked out of school because she was 20 years old and did not pass the HSPA so the board of education decided to kick her out and she was not able to get her high school diploma. This is by far the most devastating impact of the mandated high-stakes state tests.

ELLs' Responses regarding Testing Recommendations

When asked about what they would change about the assessment procedure if they had a chance, ELLs had several recommendations that they believed would be helpful for most ELLs. Most of students' recommendations revolved around the test itself and the testing accommodations.

Regarding the test itself, Marina's recommendation was to "take the classes only; no test." Maha shared the same idea, however, she admitted that this would be impossible "oh, I can't really say oh we can't have this test at all, but if it was possible I would say that." Accordingly, both Jose and Mina emphasized the importance of having a test that is designed specifically for ELLs. Jose requested a test for ELLs "in their own language or another test like special test for them like more easy for them." Similarly, Mina suggested having "a specific test for ESLs; a test that is less difficult than the HSPA for ESLs." He then added that if it were for him, he would "design a special test for ELLs or I'd put another criteria for passing, for instance if you get 150 you pass, it doesn't have to be 200." Herang had several suggestions and advices that he discussed, just don't judge people on just one test...If you give more time or if you give more classes after school, if you prepare like good, like teach them good and give

like same concept in the test, different question but like same concepts...Then make less nervous the students, and they can pass then.

Herang's notion focused on not depending on one test (HSPA) but giving students different options to assess their progress. He also suggested giving students more time before requiring them to sit for the test. Herang had to sit for the HSPA just the week after he arrived in the U.S. He also requested more preparation in the form of after school programs or the Saturday classes but for a longer period of time not just before the test. Another of his recommendation was to teach the same concepts that are covered in the test as he argued that what comes in the test is very different than what is taught in the classroom. Herang concluded his quote by a special request, not to make students nervous so that they would pass the test.

If not having to sit for the test or having a test that is designed specifically for ELLs are not possible options, at least for now, then participants stressed that ELLs should at least have an easier test with less difficult vocabulary, shorter reading passages, less complicated test items, and specific straightforward questions that are not "vague," "puzzling" or "confusing." Usha gave reasons for such a request, "Make it easier for us because we all come from different places and we didn't study all this in our country, it's different." Many ELLs would share Usha's request for a more realistic test as what they had learned in their countries is different than what they learn here.

Concerning accommodations, besides recommending giving ELLs more time, ELLs also asked for additional accommodations which they believe would be helpful for most ELLs. Usha, Carmen and Jose proposed "teacher help" as an accommodation that would be helpful. They each gave different reasons for asking for such an

accommodation. Usha, for instance, talked about ELLs in general, she stated,

sometimes people like, they need help with something, like you have to tell them even if they don't know, even if they search in the dictionary, they might not understand what it really clearly means so the teachers might wanna help them... to just understand what it means so that they can get better grades and pass the first time.

Carmen shared a similar point of view, she mentioned that some of the words used in the test are difficult and "sometimes you look at them in the dictionary, you cannot find them, it's so hard. If the teacher translate it for me, this makes it easier." Jose also gave his reason for asking for teacher help, he said, "sometimes like you can understand the words that it meant, but you can't understand the question that they can ask you."

The students' responses suggest that ELLs with low English-proficiency skills need something more than what is provided to help them deal with the linguistic demand of the test items. These students believe that they could have benefited more if they had been assessed in their native languages in addition to English or had access to another translation option. In other words, ELLs could have used some language assistance.

Summary

Regarding the overall perception of all participant groups at both the macro and micro levels, findings showed that there appear to be a general dislike of the mandated high-stakes statewide tests used with ELLs. The large number of teacher and student participants questioned the validity of the state test and regarded it as an unfair test for ELLs. Research (Abella, Urrutia & Shneyderman, 2005; Menken, Hudson, & Leung, 2014) has questioned the validity of using results of states' content assessments for

high-stakes decisions.

Participants highlighted that the language complexity of the test items, the overwhelming amount of difficult vocabulary words, the disconnect between the test and the students' backgrounds and experiences, and the fact that the test is given in English, contribute to creating an assessment beyond the proficiency level of many ELLs and it becomes more a language proficiency test than a content test, and thus an unfair test for ELLs. This finding has support from research that showed that any test that assesses academic content knowledge and that is given to ELLs in English is considered an English language proficiency test for ELLs as the language proficiency mediates the test performance (Abedi, Courtney & Leon, 2003; Menken, 2006).

Moreover, participants indicated that it is unfair to compare the performance of a native English-speaking student who has been in this country all his life and has been through its education system to someone who has just arrived in the country a few days, weeks, or even months before the test. Participants argued that these issues present enormous challenges for ELLs and make the high-stakes state test not a very appropriate assessment choice for them. Participants' responses show that ELLs are required to pass high-stakes tests in the English language before they have developed the linguistic ability to do so.

With respect to testing support, study findings revealed that the testing preparation greatly differs from one teacher to another. Although some teachers do not give any kind of special preparation for the state test and others just give some packets or books for students to practice on their own, most teachers start preparing their students long before the state tests start. Results showed that ELLs in this study were

mostly offered extra help in the form of Saturday test preparation classes, which starts five weeks before the test; and the zero period which occurs before the first period starts. However, participants indicated that not many ELLs attend these support programs as many have other responsibilities as some work, whereas others have to take care of their younger siblings while their parents are at work.

As for the accommodations, the consensus view seems to be that the testing accommodations provided, extra time and bilingual dictionaries, are not enough. Participants believed that because of the linguistic complexity of the test items and the level of difficulty of the vocabulary used in the test, the extra time allowed does not make any difference in making the students understand. Concerning bilingual dictionaries, several participants complained that some of the words used in the test are not covered in the dictionaries. This was especially obvious with the mathematics terminology. Moreover, participants complained that the tests are lengthy and have an overwhelming amount of difficult words which make it hard for ELLs to use the dictionary to find the meaning of this huge amount of vocabulary. Results showed that allowing bilingual dictionaries and more time to complete the test does not guarantee that ELLs' linguistic needs are being met.

Concerning the impact of the high-stakes test on ELLs, participants expressed that the mandated state tests had a huge psychological and academic impact on ELLs. Participants stated that state test makes most ELLs so stressed out, feel frustrated, lose confidence, and it also negatively affects students' self-esteem. Study participants reported that the academic impact included not graduating, getting a high school diploma, or going to college as well as dropping out, getting kicked out of school, and so not

pursuing future dreams. The high-stakes state test effect also extends to teachers, where teachers of students who do not achieve certain standards as other students, are denied pay incentives. Thus, many teachers are starting to refuse to teach ELLs so that they do not get labeled “failures” along with their students.

With respect to recommendations, study participants had several recommendations regarding the assessment procedures used with ELLs. Participants believed that there are more fair ways to measure ELLs’ progress than depending only on students’ scores on the state test. Some of the study participants’ recommendations included having a test that is specifically designed for ELLs; having two levels for HSPA, one for native English speakers and the other for ELLs; as well as replacing the HSPA with the ACCESS for ELLs. Other recommendations included providing the test in ELLs’ native languages, or at least the test to be graded differently based on ELLs’ language proficiency level, or making the passing score less than that required for passing native English speaking students. The results of the study show that there is a real need to improve the assessment policies that has proved to be unsuccessful with ELLs and frustrating to their teachers.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

English language learners are by far the fastest growing group of U.S. school-age population (Capps et al., 2005; Wolf et al., 2008). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), the percentage of ELLs in public schools in the U.S. in the 2013-14 school year was 9.3 percent, or an estimated 4.5 million students.

Although ELLs are the fastest growing age-group of students in U.S. schools, these students' academic performance is well below that of their native English-speaking peers (Menken, Hudson, & Leung, 2014; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). ELLs have higher dropout rates, lower academic achievement, an overrepresentation in special education programs, and reduced postsecondary goals compared to their native English-speaking peers (Menken, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Furthermore, there is a significantly lower proportion of ELLs who pass high-stakes state tests compared to their native English-speaking peers, especially at the secondary level (Smith, 2010). This is a major problem, especially as the number of ELLs continues to grow.

The growing number of ELLs coupled with increased pressure for accountability have resulted in making the under-achievement of ELLs more visible. Mandated statewide assessments that are used to measure students' academic learning do not take into account the language needs of all test-takers. As such, the use of statewide assessments raises concerns about the equity and fairness of test scores for ELLs. This

study attempted to focus attention on the marginalized group of ELLs as we work to meet their educational needs. Investing in ELLs' education is an investment in America's future.

The purpose of this mixed-method study was to analyze the practices, challenges and impact of mandated high-stakes state assessments in New Jersey on high school ELLs from the perspective of ESL teachers, content area teachers teaching ELLs, and the English language learners. The study used a teacher online survey and interviews with both teachers and ELLs to examine the extent to which the assessment system addressed the educational needs of ELLs. Seventy-one teachers responded to the online survey, and 7 teachers and 10 ELLs were interviewed regarding ELLs' experience with the high-stakes state tests. The impact of these high-stakes state tests on ELLs was also investigated. Moreover, the study included descriptions and an analysis of the accommodations provided to ELLs during state testing.

The study explored whether the assessment policies and practices used moved us closer to or further from the goal of ensuring equal opportunity for ELLs. Ensuring equal opportunity for all learners to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding is an important aspect of assessment. Hence, this study focused on the need to provide equitable education for all students in our schools. As such, the study looked at how we use high-stakes examinations as the only unit of measure of success for ELLs, and if this is equitable.

This study was also timely as it was conducted when the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) was reviewing all state assessment items in order to align them to the new standards it is adopting, the Core Curriculum State Standards

(CCSS) instead of New Jersey State Standards. The study shed some light on the inequalities in the assessment of ELLs. The findings revealed that the assessment policies used pose major challenges to ELLs who lack proficiency in the English language. It showed that the assessment policy failed to acknowledge the challenges ELLs face as well as their unique assessment needs. Moreover, the assessment policy failed to see that the process that works for native English-speaking students does not necessarily work for all students. Furthermore, the study pinpointed helpful testing accommodations and alternate assessment options for ELLs.

A collaborative process to make informed decisions is needed to ensure ELLs are appropriately assessed. It is hoped that this study would contribute to the field of ESL education by serving as a resource for policymakers to utilize in efforts to document inequities as they work to implement effective assessment practices that would create equity and excellence in the assessment of ELLs. It is crucial to identify the most effective assessment policies and practices that ensure that ELLs' educational needs are being met. Hopefully, policymakers would be more open to the suggestions made by the recipients and implementers of the education policies, namely ELLs and their teachers, regarding ideas to incorporate into the assessment of ELLs.

The overarching research question guiding the study was:

What are the perspectives and experiences of ELLs and their teachers in New Jersey regarding high-stakes state assessments?

The specific research questions for this study were as follows:

1. Do high-stakes state assessments fairly and accurately measure ELLs' knowledge from the perspectives of teachers and ELLs?

2. What kinds of testing support do ELLs receive before taking high-stakes state assessments?
3. What types of testing accommodations are used during high-stakes state assessments to address ELLs' needs? How helpful are these accommodations?
4. What is the impact of the high-stakes standardized state assessments on ELLs?
5. What recommendations can be made to improve assessment practices for ELLs?

Discussion

In this section, the findings of this study are related to the research questions and the theoretical framework. Each major section addresses one research question.

Q1. Do High-Stakes State Assessments Fairly and Accurately Measure ELLs'

Knowledge from the Perspectives of Teachers and ELLs?

The results of the study revealed that most participants at the macro and micro levels had negative perceptions in regards to the assessment practices occurring to ELLs. The teacher and student participants' comments and the general results of the study showed that there appear to be a mismatch between the intended objectives of the state assessment and the purpose for which it is really used. These tests are supposed to measure students' content knowledge and skills in subject matter. However, the findings of this study showed that because of the language complexity of the test items, we find that students' language proficiency level and content knowledge are being assessed simultaneously. As a result, participants' responses seem to question how well mandated high-stakes state tests meet their intended goal. In this respect, Mislevy and Duran (2014) emphasized that "we need to develop assessment strategies that connect assessment purposes, tasks, and cognitive and linguistic targets with authentic

classroom experiences as curriculum practices aligned with standards” (p.561).

Education policies mandating the inclusion of ELLs in statewide assessments require the implementation of reliable, valid and fair assessments for all. Literature pertaining to assessment indicates that all tests must be valid and reliable for the purposes intended (Abedi, 2004; AERA, 1999). These two properties are the foundation for test use and decision making with test results.

The study brought up many questions regarding the validity of the state test for ELLs. Assessment is said to be valid if it measures only the intended goals and objectives specified for the assessment (Coltrane, 2002). A closer examination of the issue of validity reveals that the above statement is not true with ELLs, especially as the test is developed by non-ESL educators for native English-speaking students. Assessments that are based on mainstream U.S. culture, field tested by mainstream students, and designed without knowledge of the ELLs’ native languages or cultures, are not necessarily appropriate for ELLs.

When ELLs participate in the same assessments as their native-English speaking peers, their language ability and content knowledge are being assessed simultaneously (Abedi & Lord, 2001; Menken, Hudson & Leung, 2014). The complexity of the language used on the assessments may affect performance and result in low scores. That was clear in the study participants’ responses where 98.6% of teacher survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that if students were deficient in English, then their performance on the content area statewide assessments would be affected.

Accordingly, ELLs as well as teachers, complained about the language demand and linguistic complexity of the test items especially the open-ended questions and the

math word problems. A large number of participants commented on how word problems present specific challenges for ELLs due to the language demands. Participants' views were that these tests, besides measuring students' content knowledge and skills, also measure their English language proficiency.

Consequently, participants raised many questions regarding what is actually being assessed by this test: does the test measure ELLs' academic knowledge and skills, or is it mainly a test of their language skills? Participants argued that if the purpose of a test is to measure students' academic knowledge, then students should be given the choice to do so in their native language. They felt that it is not fair to ask ELLs, who are in the process of learning a new language to show what they know in a content-area using the new language, and to evaluate their knowledge in this subject based on what they were able to express in English. Thus, interviewees and almost all teacher survey respondents (98.6%) strongly agreed or agreed that many ELLs are required to take the HSPA in English before they have developed the linguistic ability to do so.

Moreover, participants in this study criticized the validity of the test for ELLs who may not have been able to respond to test questions because of their limited exposure to some of the context embedded in these questions. Accordingly, more than 95% of the teacher survey participants strongly agreed or agreed that the state test contains language and cultural biases that can affect ELLs' performance on the test. Similarly, 97.18% of the teacher participants strongly agreed or agreed that ELLs may not be able to understand some test items because they contain background information that is outside ELLs' cultural context and life experiences. This was also discussed by teacher interviewees. These findings suggest that participants identified cultural bias

and lack of background knowledge as major challenges for ELLs to doing well on mandated state tests. Using test items based on mainstream American culture puts ELLs at a disadvantage.

Another critical factor in the assessment of ELLs is the decoding of the test questions. ELLs who lack English language proficiency require more time to deal with the questions, can easily misunderstand the directions and requirements, and may not be familiar with the figurative language used, which only a proficient English language speaker would be able to recognize and work with. Hence, participants' comments imply that these high-stakes state tests may lack validity since it is not only the subject matter content that is being assessed. For the ELLs who lack English language proficiency, the tests may then be invalid because they measure far more than they are supposed to be measuring. Research supports this point of view as it has shown that language proficiency level is correlated to content test performance and that in assessments, it is difficult to separate language from content (Abedi, Hofstetter & Lord, 2004; Menken, 2006).

It is unfair to ask learners questions in a language they do not understand; there should be an equal opportunity for success regardless of any differentiating factors among learners. In fact, since these high-stakes tests are written and administered at an advanced English proficiency level, they often leave ELLs at a disadvantage and raise questions as to how the test results should be interpreted. Using the scores of these standardized tests for high-stakes decisions is unfair to ELLs as well as to their teachers and the school that serves them.

Therefore, if the validity of the assessment of ELLs cannot be guaranteed, then

we are dealing with an issue of equity in assessment, and we should carefully examine if these inequitable assessment practices are doing more harm than good. While equality is based on equal distribution of resources (Miller, 1991), equity takes into consideration diversity and proposes policies and procedures that accommodate this diversity (Lipman, 2004). We can argue that subjecting ELLs to the same high-stakes tests as their native English-speaking peers, who have been in this country all their lives, is inequitable. Assessment should give all learners opportunity to demonstrate their understanding. Ensuring equal opportunity for learners to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding is an important aspect of assessment. In this study, the assessment practices posed major challenges for ELLs who lacked English language proficiency. If ELLs are not able to prove their knowledge due to the linguistic difficulty of a test, the test results cannot then be considered a valid and true reflection of what the students know and can do.

The results of the study showed that teachers and ELLs believe that ELLs may not be able to show their content knowledge because of the difficulty of the vocabulary used as well as the language complexity of the test items. ELLs may be able to show improvement in content knowledge only when their academic English proficiency level increases (Abedi & Lord, 2001; Menken, Hudson, & Leung, 2014). However, ELLs are often assessed in content areas long before they have developed adequate English proficiency.

Therefore, we can claim that ELLs' English language proficiency level is a major factor that impacts the validity and interpretation of high-stakes testing results for ELLs. Based on this, it is important to be careful when interpreting the test results of

ELLs. It is crucial to remember that these tests may not accurately reflect everything that ELLs know and are able to do. This point is especially crucial if the validity of the test is questionable for ELLs, or if the students were not given appropriate testing accommodations that is appropriate for their English language proficiency level.

A case can be made here especially if we consider that many of these students, as the study revealed, do well in their classes where linguistic modifications are made yet the content standard is met. Thus, the question presents itself: is it fair to judge ELLs with such high consequences on a test that is not linguistically modified? Or is it a matter of lack of trust in teachers, the implementers of the education reform process?

It is important to understand that a low score on a standardized statewide test may just mean that these ELLs may not have developed adequate English language proficiency to be able to show their content knowledge and skills on the test. It can be argued that if students were deficient in language, then an assessment that removes or at least decreases the language bias and complexity of the test would improve ELLs' understanding and performance. There is a dire need to carefully construct a special test for ELLs that is more equitable to this population.

It was no surprise that the study participants hoped for a test that is specifically designed for ELLs, a test that uses simplified English and vocabulary words that ELLs are familiar with and that avoids idiomatic expressions and linguistically complex test items. They want a test that is free of cultural biases and that uses shorter reading passages that are related to ELLs' experiences and background. Moreover, participants wish for a test that uses more specific and less vague open-ended questions as well as easier linguistically constructed math word problems. Study participants also expect to

be able to use digital dictionaries or regular dictionaries instead of the word-to-word bilingual dictionaries.

Based on the study findings, we can claim that the main problem or reason for ELLs' under-achievement on high-stakes tests is the test itself. It is inadequate for ELLs and was developed for a different student population, native English-speaking students. Moreover, it can be argued that the accommodations provided are not that useful and are not enough by themselves. Unfortunately, it seems that this case is not changing any time soon. Even with the development of the new CCSS standards and the PARCC test, the validity concerns have not been addressed and the same accommodations that were provided under NCLB are being used (Menken, Hudson, & Leung, 2014). It seems that the ELL population has not even been considered in the new education reform.

Accordingly, since the case will stay the same, and no change is anticipated to happen soon on the policy level regarding ELLs; all we can do is to focus on the little that we can accomplish in the classroom to help our ELL population. Since the results of the study revealed that many ELLs are not familiar with the U.S. assessment system, it would be valuable to teach ELLs test-taking skills that can help prepare them for the types of test items they may face.

It may be also helpful to raise ELLs' awareness of the discourse and formats of standardized tests as well as to teach them the terminology used in these tests which the math teacher participants in this study highlighted as a big challenge for ELLs. Research has repeatedly showed that in many cases classroom instruction does not adequately provide ELLs with access to the "language of schooling" through which content area

knowledge is taught and learned (Schleppegrell, 2004, p. ix). Therefore, equipping ELLs with some test-taking skills may help lower their testing anxiety, which may result from their unfamiliarity with the test format and terminology. Consequently, it would be beneficial to hold orientation sessions for ELLs about statewide tests. The teaching and assessment that goes on in the classroom could help in students' understanding and performance on statewide assessments.

In conclusion, assessments should be accessible and free of cultural and linguistic biases in order to effectively assess ELLs (Abedi, Courtney & Leon, 2003; Abedi & Ewers, 2013), especially when making placement, graduation and retention decisions for these students. Research (Abella, Urrutia & Shneyderman, 2005; Menken, Hudson, & Leung, 2014) has questioned the validity of using results of states' content assessments for high-stakes decisions. Accordingly, participants in this study have questioned the purpose as well as the rationale behind using statewide tests. As a result, there is a dire need for valid assessment that measures only the intended goals and objectives specified. Furthermore, we need to consider students' life circumstances and experiences (Rubin & Silva, 2003) which as the study results showed are very different for most ELLs compared to that of their native English-speaking peers. This was clearly illustrated in the teachers' stories.

Q2. What Kinds of Testing Support do ELLs Receive before Taking High-Stakes State Assessments?

The findings of this study revealed that the testing preparation greatly differs from one class to the other and from one teacher to another. Although some teachers do not give any kind of special preparation and others just give students some practice on their

own, most teachers start preparing their students long before the tests start. Even though some students seemed to appreciate their teachers' help, others questioned the value of the ESL program in general. Those students believed that being in a mainstream English-only class would prepare them better for the linguistic demands of the mandated high-stakes state tests.

Based on this, those ELLs believed that ESL classes are a burden and that placing ELLs in ESL classes rather than regular classes limits their abilities as they are given simple English and are not exposed to the full range of vocabulary and strong materials as their peers in mainstream English classes. It is worth noting that one of the math teachers embraced this same point of view as well. Wong Fillmore (2014) backed these students' point of view regarding the use of diluted materials and so she opposed that tradition of ELL teachers avoiding complex and sophisticated texts describing it as inappropriate in the current standards context. She also emphasized the importance of helping ELLs build academic language and literacy through dealing and interacting with sophisticated texts and focusing on meaning, understanding, as well as on how discourse is structured.

On the other hand, research does not support students' viewpoint regarding placing ELLs in mainstream classrooms instead of ESL or bilingual programs. Work done by Thomas and Collier (2002) identified ELLs enrolled in English language monolingual setting as having the poorest outcomes in reading and math achievement. Also, the largest number of dropouts also came from this group of students. However, it seems that ELLs' point of view may be due to the frustration that some ELLs may

have felt seeing their English native-speaking peers, in regular English classes, pass the state test while they find themselves struggling to pass.

Another possible explanation for this point of view may be that mandated state tests are considered high-stakes tests as there are high consequences for students who do not pass. ELLs know that passing these tests was a requirement for graduation. Moreover, ELLs who did not pass the state test were targeted for remedial interventions before school and on Saturdays. Thus, those students may have felt pressured to pass these tests and it seems that some of them believed that being in an English-only environment would help them achieve their goal.

In addition to regular in-class preparation, ELLs were offered help and testing support in preparation for the HSPA in the form of a zero period and Saturday classes that are offered for five consecutive weeks just before the HSPA test. However, a number of students and teachers indicated that many of the ELLs have other responsibilities, many work most weekends and till late night during weekdays to help their families, so it was hard for some to attend these test support programs.

In general, it seems that many teachers are making a real effort to help their ELLs. However, teachers' responses showed that they feel lack of support and understanding on the side of the state officials. Teachers complained that state officials care about nothing but the scores; they argued that policymakers do not want to see the whole picture. Teachers discussed that ELLs are required to pass assessments that assume that students are able to read and comprehend in English at grade level. However, policymakers do not want to acknowledge that other achievements made by ELLs. For example, an ELL may go from a language proficiency level of a second

grader to a seventh grader in just one year, but that achievement is not recognized; it seems that only scores matter.

Teachers felt that policymakers are not aware of the issues that are going on in the lives of these vulnerable young learners. Teachers work hard trying to “make sense of multiple, often incoherent, policy mandates” (Nolan, 2016, p.1), and they want to be successful. Often times, teachers’ frustration, questioning and confusion with these conflicting mandates are interpreted as resistance. However, some scholars (Nolan, 2015) recognize the teachers’ good insight, based on their professional beliefs and experiences, that standards-based reforms are sometimes detrimental to their students’ success. In this current study, teachers’ perceived a disconnect between the ELL population and their teachers, and the state policymakers on the other side. They felt left out of the policymaking process. A number of teachers strongly believed that there are not even ESL advocates on the state committees.

Unfortunately, the accountability system relies mainly on high-stakes statewide tests as the only source of information regarding students’ learning. Nevertheless, teachers complained that the results of the statewide tests are not provided in a timely manner; it comes out very late and so it is not utilized to inform changes in the instructional practices. Loeb, Knapp, & Elfers (2008) stated that most standardized tests are not very helpful to teachers trying to improve the performance of their students. As most standardized test results do not give teachers much guidance about what their own students understand or need.

Consequently, it would be beneficial and crucial to have meetings and conferences on a regular basis that involve policymakers, ESL teachers, and ELLs,

meetings where the voices of ELLs and their teachers can reach the decision makers. It is urgent to raise the policymakers' awareness of the challenges that many ELLs face with the high-stakes state tests.

In conclusion, the study findings seem to question the whole purpose of high-stakes state tests. Assessment should be an encouraging factor in learning and an intrinsic part of the learning process itself that feeds back into teaching and learning (Goldberg, 2005). Finally, our ELLs need to be assured that these high-stakes tests would be a true reflection of their knowledge and would help address their challenges in learning, only then would the assessment lead to positive educational outcomes. Because "when assessments are invalid or inappropriate for emergent bilinguals in the name of standardization, and when results carry serious negative consequences, they can cause these students more harm than good" (Menken, Hudson, & Leung, 2014, p.609).

Q3. What Types of Testing Accommodations Are Used During High-Stakes State Assessments to Address ELLs' Needs? How Helpful are These Accommodations?

Participants at both the macro and micro level raised questions regarding ELLs' participation in high-stakes statewide assessments and their performance in relation to accommodation use. Accommodations are meant to assist students in demonstrating their learning. However, the results of the study showed that although allowing ELLs bilingual dictionaries and more time to complete the test may be helpful in some cases, such accommodations do not guarantee that ELLs' linguistic needs are being met. It appears that the accommodations provided were not sufficient to address the challenges ELLs faced with high-stakes state tests.

Accommodations are ways of reducing inequalities in assessment without invalidly influencing the assessment results, especially when there is a barrier to learning, in this case ELLs' English language proficiency. Accommodations for ELLs are intended to minimize the irrelevant language demands on performance, allowing students to demonstrate their true academic skills and content knowledge (Kieffer et al., 2009). Hence, the purpose of accommodations is to provide ELLs with an equal opportunity to perform on tests as their native English-speaking peers. According to Abedi (2004), for an accommodation to be effective, it should minimize the language barrier and enable ELLs to demonstrate knowledge in that content area.

Regarding the use of the bilingual dictionary, participants indicated that many ELLs do not use the dictionary. If ELLs are not using the accommodation provided, then the accommodation fails to provide the linguistic support that ELLs need to level the playing field. Participants indicated that this lack of use is due to ELLs' inability to cope with the increased volume of text to be read, not finding the words in the dictionary, and not giving the correct intended meaning. Research supports this finding as Abedi, Courtney & Leon (2003) found out that few ELLs used the customized English dictionary provided as an accommodation. It may be argued that this lack of use of the bilingual dictionary may indicate that the accommodation provided is not useful.

Furthermore, Clark-Gareca (2016) conducted a mixed-methods study to examine teacher accommodation implementation when assessing ELLs during classroom math and science tests. The researcher surveyed elementary teachers in ten Pennsylvania school districts and interviewed ten teachers about their assessment practices. Findings

suggest that accommodations that are offered in high-stakes state tests were infrequently implemented in the classroom context. These results may mean that ELLs may have not been familiar with the accommodations offered during state tests and so are not able to use it effectively. The findings may also be interpreted that the teaching as well as the classroom tests do not provide any or enough familiarity with state allowed accommodations.

ELLs are also provided with extra time as an accommodation, one and half the time allowed for native English-speaking peers. Although some students believed that extra time is helpful, many teachers contradicted this view. They believed that if ELLs were provided with all the time in the world, it would not make a difference. Teachers indicated that the test is higher than ELLs' English proficiency level and so it is hard for them to understand it, and extra time would not help in this matter. Teacher participants believed that extra time would only help slow students but it would not do much with understanding.

ELLs cannot just be considered as one group of students; they are a diverse group with different needs. Different students at different English language proficiency levels may have different needs (Abella, Urrutia & Shneyderman, 2005). In a study done by Burke, Morita-Mullaney, and Singh (2016), they examined Indiana emergent bilinguals' time to become reclassified as fluent English proficient. They studied reclassification for different emergent bilingual populations using data of five years of statewide English language proficiency scores. Results showed that Spanish-speaking emergent bilinguals took the longest to acquire English proficiency and be reclassified as fluent English

proficient. They concluded that Spanish-speaking emergent bilinguals face additional and unique challenges compared to students with other native languages.

Consequently, education officials need to look carefully at which testing accommodations are most appropriate for students at different English proficiency levels. For instance, ELLs in this study could have benefited more if the test was linguistically less complex, culturally less biased, and more relevant to their background and circumstances. In such a case, the results of the test would have been more valid as ELLs would have had a better chance to demonstrate their true content knowledge. Furthermore, it would have been helpful if ELLs had access to another translation option such as digital dictionaries or subject dictionaries where it would have been easier for them to find the correct intended meaning for the math terminology as well as the difficult vocabulary words used in the test. Additionally, some ELLs who have been in the U.S. for a year or less would have benefited more if they had been assessed in their native languages in addition to English. In other words, ELLs could have used some language assistance. Identifying the linguistic needs of ELLs would help determine useful language-related accommodations.

It is clear that students' language proficiency level plays a critical role in their performance on the statewide assessments. Depending on ELLs' language proficiency level, different appropriate accommodations may be used. For instance, ELLs at levels 1 (Entering) and 2 (Emerging) may need to be tested in their native language besides English to be able to get a true reflection of their content knowledge and skills. While ELLs at level 3 (Developing) and level 4 (Expanding) may seem to benefit more from

linguistic accommodations, those that are related to language, such as simplified English, reading aloud and clarifying directions, and translations.

Additionally, appropriate language level vocabulary and terminology was one of the top recommendations by ELL participants. This accommodation could to some extent level the playing field between ELLs and native English-speaking students and thus help in narrowing the achievement gap. Some of the study participants indicated that ELLs who possess content knowledge and skills in math were not able to show this knowledge as they could not understand the vocabulary words and the linguistic structures of the test items.

Researchers have supported the use of linguistic accommodations to help ELLs demonstrate their knowledge in specific content areas (Abedi, Hofstetter, & Lord, 2004; Acosta, Rivera & Willner, 2008) and these students performed better when individual language needs were addressed (Wolf et al., 2008). Linguistic support is not meant to help ELLs form a response to a test item but rather to process the English language more easily (Abedi & Ewers, 2013). Linguistic accommodations help ELLs to better understand content presented in English.

Research conducted by Abedi and others (Abedi, Courtney, M & Leon 2003; Abedi & Lord, 2001; Abedi, Lord & Plummer, 1997) found out that ELLs have difficulty with linguistically complex test items and that reducing linguistic complexity of test items decreases the performance gap between ELLs and native English-speaking peers. Abedi's studies found a large performance gap between ELLs and native English-speaking students in reading and writing, the areas that have a significant amount of language demand. For math computation, the performance gap almost

disappeared. This finding shows that reducing the language complexity on content-based assessments could improve the validity of assessments for ELLs.

The findings of this study revealed that the accommodations allowed for ELLs are ineffective as they are considered non-linguistic accommodations, which means they are the same kind of accommodation used with students with disabilities, such as extended time. However, this type of accommodation does not address the linguistic needs of ELLs but only allows minor changes in testing conditions (Abedi, Hofstetter & Lord, 2004). Comprehension of language used in a content area requires linguistically based accommodations. These linguistic accommodations may be needed to help make content accessible to ELLs. Consequently, a large number of the study participants considered the allowed accommodations not enough or not relevant, and they recommended using linguistic accommodations instead, such as reading directions aloud, paraphrasing directions and questions, clarifying difficult questions and vocabulary, and digital dictionaries.

Overall, using linguistic accommodations such as simplified language that ELLs would be better able to understand and relate to and avoiding idiomatic expressions could make a difference in ELLs' performance on mandated high-stakes state tests. Research (Abedi, Hofstetter & Lord, 2004; Kieffer et al., 2009; Pennock-Roman & Rivera, 2011; Sireci et al., 2003) has shown support for the simplified English and dictionary/glossary accommodations, which include the pop-up English glossary administered via computer. Appropriate accommodations could allow ELLs to demonstrate their knowledge on the test. There is a real need to create a meaningful

testing environment and to select appropriate accommodations that yield meaningful test scores.

Unfortunately, it does not seem that the new CCSS assessments that have been developed and are now being implemented in U.S. schools, have solved any of the problems discussed. According to Menken, Hudson, & Leung (2014) these new assessments, such as PARCC, “continue operating from the same accommodations paradigm, already proven ineffective and detrimental for emergent bilinguals under NCLB, leaving students disproportionately likely to fail high-stakes tests and face consequences” (p.608). ELLs have the right to appropriate and reasonable accommodations that can level the playing field between them and their native English-speaking peers.

Q4. What is the Impact of the High-Stakes Standardized State Assessments on ELLs?

The study findings revealed that the high-stakes state tests have negative psychological and academic impact on ELLs. Most participants viewed high-stakes state tests as a source of discomfort, anxiety, and stress; largely due to ELLs’ sense of helplessness during these tests and anticipated failure. Students and teachers reported that ELLs feel so stressed out and frustrated as a result of the consequences of not passing this test that it negatively affects their self-esteem. The emotional impact of not yet having passed the statewide test was high. ELLs are still trying to hang in there, but were clearly tired of the retakes and affected deeply by the consequences.

Students were pressured and stressed and this feeling increased by the number of retakes, especially when they were seniors and needed to pass these state tests in order

to graduate. Menken (2006) highlights such challenges faced by ELLs, “ELLs [are] at a serious disadvantage when test results are used as the primary criteria for high-stakes decisions such as high school graduation” (p. 522). ELLs were confused and doubted the fairness of these high-stakes tests especially when they were in good standing in terms of classes, credits and grades. Some of them had even started taking classes and credits at college.

Unfortunately, the assessment system used, which relies heavily on the mandated high-stakes standardized statewide tests, continues to show ELLs as academically unsuccessful. This has an egregious impact on those students’ confidence and leads to ELLs accepting their scores as a sign of inability and giving up. Students are aware that even if they complete all high school requirements but fail the state test, they still will not be able to graduate. Repeated failure depressed them; and many of them were unaware of any techniques that could help them improve and overcome the challenges that face them during these tests. Regrettably, this vulnerable population viewed the test scores as evidence of their lack of ability.

The current assessment system puts so much weight on this marginalized group of students. An outsider’s view might show that the current accountability system provides all students, including the ELL population, with equal education opportunity as all students are being subjected to the same assessment system. However, in this case we can argue that the same treatment does not mean equal or the same opportunity. The assessment system used only shows many ELLs that they are incapable learners. It perpetuates the perceived inferiority of this group of students. It does not acknowledge

that ELLs, as a group, are faced with more hurdles than their native English-speaking peers.

The message that is being communicated by these policies is that anyone can work hard and succeed, but for this marginalized group of students there are obstacles that policymakers who belong to privileged communities do not acknowledge. They ignore these obstacles and use a system that labels and defines this vulnerable population as “failures.” Johnson states, “reducing people to a single dimension of who they are separates and excludes them, marks them as “other,” as different from “normal” people and therefore as inferior” (2000, p.15). If students are not shown that they are capable learners, regardless of a perceived social stigma, then they will start to believe it.

The outcome of these traumatic experiences was a total dislike of the assessment practices used. It is no surprise that this negativity and repeated failures eventually led some students to drop out of school, as reported by teacher and student interviewees. Research (Menken, Hudson, & Leung, 2014) also supports this point of view as the dropout rate of ELLs increased by 14 percent in New York since testing requirements began. These findings also align with research that shows that the dropout rates among language minority students are much higher than students from English only backgrounds.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2012, 2016), ELLs have higher dropout rates than their native English-speaking peers. Smith (2010) found out that there is a significantly lower proportion of ELLs who pass high-stakes statewide tests compared to their native English-speaking peers, especially at the secondary level. In

2002, among tenth graders ELLs were twice as likely to drop out of school as those from English backgrounds (Rumberger, 2006). Furthermore, in 2004, 31% of ELL youth ages 18-24 that were not enrolled in school had neither completed high school, compared to only 10% of native English speakers (Klein et al., 2004).

Other academic impact of high-stakes state tests included not graduating, getting a high school diploma, or going to college; and some end by getting kicked out of school. The results of this research suggest that high-stakes testing policies could have a detrimental effect on ELLs' educational outcomes.

It was encouraging to see that in such a context, teachers did not see their students as failures. For instance, Ms. Honest stepped in to defend ELLs against labeling them "failures" based on uninformed decisions and unfair test scores. She talked with the ELLs and tried to find ways to help them regain confidence in their abilities and take pride in what they have achieved. She also sent a clear message to state officials that "our students are successful. Our students go from a second grade level to a seventh grade level, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year." Ms. Honest expressed that this is a great achievement that "should be applauded but when the HSPA comes in, they're labeled failures." Hopkins, Thompson, Linqunti, Hakuta, and August (2013) discussed this issue. They argued that "the system focuses solely on reaching academic proficiency and ignores the growth students make in content area achievement toward that performance standard. Such systems underreport progress and discourage students and educators" (p.106).

What is sad is that not only students were labeled "failures" for not achieving the same level as their native English-speaking peers who have been in the U.S. education

system all their lives, but their teachers too were subjected to high-stakes consequences. Teachers felt targeted, as teachers and schools whose students did not perform well on the state test would face sanctions for not meeting AYP. That is, teachers whose students do not perform proficiently on high-stakes state tests were denied the pay incentives available to those whose students achieve certain proficient levels. Teachers felt depressed that this was the case. As a result, teachers truly hoped for alternative assessments that would document students' learning over time.

The problem that resulted from this merit pay is that as Ms. Honest clarified, many teachers started to refuse to teach ELLs. This standpoint was an expected result of what happened in 2012 when the results of teachers' ranking, based on their students' performance, appeared in New York Post. The name and photo of the city's worst teacher, which no surprise, was an ESL teacher was posted publicly. High-stakes tests have proved to have high-stakes consequences for teachers as much as for students. It seems that teachers are constantly faced with challenges of negotiating policies that demand more and more from them and their ELLs without supporting them in anyway. As much as awareness is necessary, it is action in addressing these injustices that is truly needed.

Q5. What Recommendations Can be Made to Improve Assessment Practices for ELLs?

The findings shed light on the nature of the challenges in assessment that ELLs encounter. Participants questioned the fairness of giving a high-stakes test in English to students who were not yet fluent in the language, particularly for newcomers. Informants believed that the accommodations provided was not enough to address the

challenges ELLs faced in assessment; and that it failed to remove the challenges. As a result, the study participants provided numerous suggestions that they believed would improve the assessment practices and help the ELL population better achieve.

Appropriate language level vocabulary and terminology surfaced as one of the top recommendations by participants. As seen in this study, ELLs who possess content knowledge and skills in mathematics, were not able to show their knowledge as they could not understand the vocabulary words and the linguistic structures of the test items. Consequently, participants emphasized that the linguistic complexity in the assessment questions needed to be addressed to facilitate ELLs' comprehension. They also required some measure of accommodation in the scoring of ELLs' assessments. Moreover, relying only on one test to make decisions about students' future was heavily criticized by most participants. The results suggest a real need for use of multiple forms of assessment to ensure that students' actual knowledge and skills are accurately assessed. In this respect, Hakuta (2013) argues that we need to recognize the limitations of large-scale assessment, while at the same time understand that formative assessments can help fill the gaps and create opportunity to learn.

Participants also recommended having a special test that is designed specifically for ELLs. Some also suggested using the ACCESS instead of the HSPA to assess ELLs; or developing two different versions of the HSPA, a higher level for native English speaking students and another one with less complicated vocabulary and terminology for ELLs. Other recommendations revolved around testing ELLs with low English-proficiency skills in their native languages in addition to English or providing them with another translation option to help them deal with the linguistic demand of the

test items. In other words, participants requested some language assistance for ELLs. Consequently, participants asked for better construction of ideas and clarification of the meaning of the statements. It is worth noting that most participants were ready with several recommendations for alternative assessment methods, which shows that this issue has been in the back of their minds.

In closing, the commitment and thoughtfulness of the teachers was inspiring. The teacher participant interviewees provided an in-depth analysis on how teachers viewed their ELLs and their abilities, and revealed their optimistic attitude that their ELLs could do better if given appropriate assessments and adequate accommodations. Teachers did not blame their students for their low performance on mandated state tests. In fact, they applauded their progress. They viewed their students as true achievers and so, it was no surprise that, none of the teachers suggested that the problem was that ELLs do not study enough or are not committed. Teachers blamed the assessment system for ELLs' under-achievement.

Finally, it is hoped that until policy issues are resolved, ELL state test scores not be used to impose sanctions on ELLs, teachers and schools, but rather make decisions about how to better educate and assess ELLs. However, with the current CCSS assessments already being implemented in U.S. schools, our hopes are diminished. Menken, Hudson, & Leung (2014) share the same concern, "while new CCSS assessments are being developed to replace current tests, states are speeding ahead before making significant efforts to redress validity threats, and concerns for emergent bilinguals are left at the periphery of reforms (p.606)."

Implications of the Study

Based on the findings of this study, the following points need to be considered:

There is a responsibility for the education decision-makers to address the educational needs of ELLs in general and the assessment needs in particular. As the number of ELLs continues to grow in U.S. schools, it is crucial that education policymakers implement effective assessment practices that address the educational needs of ELLs.

Move away from high-stakes state tests. Participants at both the macro and micro level, and both teachers and students had a strong dislike regarding the use of high-stakes state tests with ELLs. There is a crucial need to move away from these types of tests which do not acknowledge ELLs' learning growth but penalize them for not achieving at the same level as their native English-speaking peers.

An important point is that the focus on high-stakes state tests has led to a trend of stigmatizing ELLs and identifying them as the group of students who brings scores down. Unfortunately, this has led to a negative attitude towards such a population from some educators, and has made some teachers to refuse teaching those students. There is a critical need to stop using high-stakes test scores as the one and only factor in evaluating ELLs, their teachers, and the school that serves them. Other countries throughout the world rely less on the use of standardized assessment and have higher rates of achievement (Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2010).

Furthermore, these tests are not used in religious and private schools. That is, if ELLs could afford to go to these schools, they would be able to graduate, get a high school diploma, and go to college just by passing the required courses without having to

go through all the hassles of the state tests. However, because of their socioeconomic status, they are at a disadvantage. Using high-stakes state tests as a major factor in deciding ELLs' future has created a very stressful environment where the only one affected is the vulnerable ELL population. We need schools that are supportive, welcoming and at the same time, academically challenging for all the students and high-stakes tests have failed to create such an environment.

Ongoing and multiple forms of assessments. To move away from the high-stakes state tests dilemma, we need to institute a system that relies on ongoing and multiple forms of assessment that provide better results than those of a single assessment. There is an urgent need to re-examine the way academic success is measured so that it would not only mean passing standardized tests. ELLs take part in high-stakes statewide tests that are not intended for them, but were developed to evaluate native English-speaking students. As a result, many ELLs are unable to pass these tests. This is not what we would expect, especially given that the ELL population is rapidly growing. Assessment should be used for supporting the teaching and learning process rather than for sanctioning students, teachers, and schools.

Research suggests that frequent formative assessments for ELLs are best for assessing the skills being taught (Espinoza and Lopez, 2007). Consequently, participants indicated that it is not fair to just rely on one test to make decisions regarding someone's future. Effective measurement of ELLs' knowledge and skills necessitates that ELLs receive multiple forms of assessment. Therefore, it would be wise to use various forms of assessment to accurately assess ELLs.

Teachers as decision makers. To arrive at the aforementioned goal, it is important that teachers of ELLs, the implementers of the reform, be involved in the decision-making process concerning which tests to be used with ELLs. Teachers in this study felt dejected that their opinion and experience do not count at the decision-making level; they are being treated as passive recipients of the educational policies. Teachers stated that they are not even allowed to see the test as if they cannot be trusted. Also a number of teachers indicated that they are almost certain that there are no ESL teacher advocates on the committees; they believe that there is no way that any ESL advocate would subject ELLs to such a torture. In order for assessment to support student learning, it must include teachers at all stages. Hence, the testing committees at the state levels responsible for choosing the tests should include teachers of ELLs as this would ensure that the tests selected to be used with ELLs are appropriate to their English proficiency level.

ELLs as decision makers. Similarly, ELLs are the recipients of the high-stakes assessment policies. They have opinions about the policies to which they are often subjected; yet they tend to be viewed by policymakers as passive recipients of reform. This flawed point of view need to be changed. ELLs perspectives as well as that of their teachers need to be more respected and valued; they both should be included as active participants in the education policy process.

Professional organizations' role. In view of that, professional organizations such as Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), National Association of Bilingual Education, (NABE) and others need to work together to encourage the federal government to make changes in the assessment policy for ELLs

in a way that would ensure ELLs' educational needs are being met. Many of these organizations have opposed the assessments' influence in making high-stakes decisions. TESOL in its position paper on high-stakes tests stated that "since high English proficiency is a prerequisite for success on high-stakes tests, such assessments are not appropriate for English language learners and often do more harm than good (p.3)." TESOL has worked for many years to ensure that ELLs' needs are being met and has outlined several recommendations for assessment of ELLs; however, these suggestions are ignored by policymakers. We need to develop assessments that would be a true reflection of ELLs' knowledge and ability and an encouraging and motivating factor in their learning.

In conclusion, the findings of this study revealed that the one-size-fits-all high-stakes state tests that are mainly developed for native English-speaking students have proven to fail to fit all and only fit few. Bigelow (2009) explains that, "in practice, these tests are hostile to good teaching and pose a special threat to multiculturalism" (p.53). ELLs are not being provided with equal educational opportunity as "Equal is not the same." That is "treating everyone in the same way will not necessarily lead to equality; rather, it may end up perpetuating the inequality that already exists" (Nieto, 2004, p.145). This concept was clearly affirmed in the Supreme Court case *Lau vs. Nichols* (1974). The use of standardized testing "impedes equity in our schools," especially when it bears high-stakes. In fact, the assessment policies and practices have "a detrimental impact because gross inequities in instructional quality, resources, and other support services are being ignored (Nieto, 2004, p.97, 99).

The excessive use of testing has reduced the whole process of education to numbers. In this accountability era, the quality of education is defined as scores on standardized state tests while students' life circumstances, future, and learning progress have been excluded from this equation. These tests have not improved the education of ELLs but rather has put their future at risk. No student should be retained, denied a high school diploma, or placed in an academic track based on just one test score. The assessment practices have stigmatized ELLs because of their performance on the state tests.

It seems that the policymakers and test makers are being culturally blind as they are "refusing to accept differences and, therefore, accepting the dominant culture as the norm" (Nieto, 2004, p.145). Lee (2009) states that, "oftentimes, whatever is white is treated as normal. So when teachers choose literature ... it's basically white culture and civilization. That culture is different from others, but it does not get named as different. It gets named as normal" (p.10). As such, many teaching, learning and assessment practices are seen as normal, when they do not support students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In addition, not acknowledging students' differences can result in viewing students' differences as deficiencies. Culture is integral to the learning process; it influences learning and teaching. Because of this, educators and test makers need to make adaptations to include all students' cultures and to find ways to promote achievement of all students. Curriculum and assessment cannot just be designed to target the dominant norms of white culture; we need a multicultural and multilingual approach to support students of all backgrounds instead.

There is a crucial need for considerable changes to the assessment policies and practices used with ELLs. Standardized state tests, if at all considered, should be only as one aspect of the whole, not the only aspect. In fact, we need to let go of the high-stakes state tests and move towards a system of ongoing and multiple forms of assessments that would render results that are a more valid and true reflection of the academic knowledge and skills of ELLs.

It is important for policymakers to use this information to improve the education of the growing number of ELLs in U.S. schools. Policymakers need to carefully consider the consequences of state tests, especially when those consequences bear high-stakes for students, teachers, and schools. Policymakers need also to learn more about the communities of ELLs, their culture, backgrounds, experiences, as well as their life issues to be able to better serve them.

Similarly, test makers should work on developing alternative and multiple forms of assessment that can fairly and accurately measure students' progress. At the same time, they need to be extra cautious not to use culturally biased tests that privilege the mainstream culture and values. Involving teachers of ELLs in this process would help ensure that these tests are more relevant to students' backgrounds and experiences. Teachers experience and insight would also be invaluable regarding which tests to be used with ELLs at different English language proficiency levels. Administrators should be the line of communication between the teachers and ELLs, on one hand, and the state, test makers and policymakers, on the other hand. They must take responsibility and contest policies that are unfair to them, their teachers, and students. They need to

challenge the actions of the state and policymakers that affect students' education. In this way, they can help create positive change.

Recommendations for Further Research

As the ELL population continues to tremendously increase in number across the nation, issues related to meeting the educational needs of this group of students will continue to be important. This study tried to disclose some of the major challenges ELLs have with the mandated high-stakes state tests. There is still a continued need to evaluate ELLs' education as well as their academic achievement. Recommendations for further research based on the findings of this research include:

1. Based on the findings, this current study could be built upon by exploring the challenges of the ELLs with the PARCC test and comparing it with the current study to see if it yields similar or different results and if there is any improvement in addressing ELLs' issues with high-stakes state tests. Also the PARCC is a computer-based test so it would be interesting to investigate how ELLs, who come from poor socioeconomic backgrounds and who did not have access to computers back in their home countries, are being prepared, if at all, for that test. ELLs' opinions would also be very valuable in such a study.
2. An important study that deserves close examination is one that looks at alternative assessment tools that can be developed and can accurately reflect ELLs' content knowledge and skills.
3. Another interesting study that can come out of this current research pertains to teachers' attitudes. There is a need for a research study that investigates

teachers' attitudes towards teaching ELLs. This would be a timely study especially with the start of the merit pay, and many teachers already, as informants highlighted, do not want to be involved or stigmatized by teaching the ELL population.

4. Another valuable study would be to examine test anxiety and how it might vary based on variables, such as the number of retakes, ELLs' career goals, length of time in the U.S., proficiency level, etc.
5. The current study did not address the issue of ELLs with interrupted formal education. Therefore, further research can be conducted regarding the issues of how to assess these students' content knowledge and skills.
6. Another area of possible research relates to the over-representation of the ELL population in special education classes. Additional research can be conducted to investigate and assess the assessment indicators and criteria used to make such a decision.
7. Further research might also include a survey of the perspectives of ELLs of their challenges with the high-stakes statewide tests and what they consider most effective in supporting them in school and out of school to passing these tests.
8. Another valuable research study would be to interview policymakers themselves to qualitatively investigate their perspectives and knowledge base regarding the principles of ELL learning and assessment as well as whether they consider the current high-stakes tests a true measurement of ELLs' knowledge and skills.

9. Finally, another area for future research would be to explore the long-term achievement of former-ELLs. It would also prove helpful to examine these students' achievement through high school and post-secondary education.

Conclusion

This study tried to shed some light on the inequalities in the assessment of ELLs. The study gave all the participants the opportunity to express, from their personal perspective, challenges with the mandated high-stakes state assessment and it enabled them to make recommendations to address these challenges. The study revealed some of the stress, anxiety, helplessness, frustration and even anger experienced by the participants during assessment. Assessment does not have to be a stressful and demotivating experience. We definitely do not need assessment that highlights students' failures; we need it to be a beneficial learning experience.

The findings of this study leave us with a belief that changes need to be made if we are to successfully educate the nation's fastest growing group of learners. The results clearly point to the need for an improved assessment system for ELLs. Therefore, providing the rising number of ELLs in U.S. schools with alternative test options, appropriate accommodations, and access to grade level curriculum may ensure that the assessments allow ELLs to show what they know and are able to do, and this would be a step in the right direction.

This study is not trying by any means to give ELLs any advantage over other students. One of the main purposes of this study is to discourage the use of inequitable assessment process with ELLs. It is hoped that this study, through highlighting the many challenges ELLs face with high-stakes state tests, would resolve the issues of

inequality in assessment as well as encourage policymakers to critically examine their decisions, and evaluate whether the assessment policies used are grounded in theory and adequately support ELLs' success, or are merely uninformed decisions. This study is trying to promote equity and fairness in the assessment of ELLs. Perhaps the voices of ELLs are just what policymakers need in order to truly understand the effect of these policies on this vulnerable group. We are optimistic that the students' and teachers' voices may persuade policymakers to reexamine the educational policies to respond to students' diverse needs and the realities of our schools.

Overall, if we are to truly reduce inequities in education and achieve our goal of preparing all our students, including ELLs, for college, career and life then policymakers need to consider the importance of finding more equitable forms of assessment for ELLs to better support the nation's growing student population. By critically analyzing the challenges that ELLs have with mandated high-stakes state tests, we can begin to fully understand the impact and consequences of the assessment policy on ELLs, and suggest ways to provide equitable assessment for ELLs. The assessment policy needs to be re-evaluated and informed decisions for addressing ELLs' challenges are needed.

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List of Appendices

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Appendix A

Teacher Online Survey

Questionnaire for ESL teachers and teachers with English language learners in their classrooms.

Dear Teachers: *The following questionnaire has been prepared by Mary Farah, doctoral student at Rutgers University. The questions have been designed to learn about the practices, challenges and impact of current statewide standardized assessments on high school English language learners. This survey is anonymous and you are not required to reveal your name at any time. Only the researcher will have access to the survey. By completing this survey, you are indicating your consent to participate in this study.*

- In which county do you teach?

- | | | | |
|--------------|--------------|------------|----------|
| • Atlantic | • Gloucester | • Morris | • Sussex |
| • Bergen | • Hudson | • Ocean | • Union |
| • Burlington | • Hunterdon | • Passaic | • Warren |
| • Camden | • Mercer | • Salem | |
| • Cape May | • Middlesex | • Somerset | |
| • Cumberland | • Monmouth | | |
| • Essex | | | |

- What subject(s) area do you teach?
- What grade/s do you teach?
- How many English Language Learners (ELLs) do you teach each day?
- How many years have you been teaching?
- How many years have you been teaching ELL students?
- How do ELL students do on the statewide-standardized tests (HSPA)?

Very well	well	fair	poor
-----------	------	------	------
- There is a gap between the performance of ELL students and native English speaking students on statewide-standardized tests (HSPA).

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
----------------	-------	----------	-------------------
- It is not fair to include ELL students in the same statewide-standardized tests that are designed for native English speaking students.

- | | | | | |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
- It is more difficult for ELLs to pass the HSPA test than native-English speaking students?
- | | | | | |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
- Difficult vocabulary is a major obstacle to ELL students' performance on the HSPA.
- | | | | | |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
- ELL students can easily understand content area statewide tests as these tests are at ELL students' English language proficiency level.
- | | | | | |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
- Many ELL students are required to take the HSPA in English before they have developed the linguistic ability to do so.
- | | | | | |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
- ELL students may not be able to understand some test items in the HSPA because they contain background information which is outside ELL students' cultural context and life experiences.
- | | | | | |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
- ELL students are good at math but because of the difficult vocabulary words that are used in the word problems, many of them don't pass.
- | | | | | |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
- If students are deficient in English, then their performance on the content-area statewide assessments will be affected.
- | | | | | |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
- HSPA tests contain language and cultural biases that can affect ELL students' performance on the tests.
- | | | | | |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
- Statewide-standardized tests accurately assess the content knowledge of ELL students.
- | | | | | |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
- It is important to have a test that is designed specifically for ELL students.
- | | | | | |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
- ELL students should be able to take the HSPA in their native languages.
- | | | | | |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|

- Many ELL students do not pass the HSPA from the first time.
Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
- ELL students' poor performance on statewide assessments is to a great extent related to the fact that the assessment is given in English only.
Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
- Current statewide standardized tests help bring ELLs up to high standards.
Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
- The HSPA is an appropriate assessment tool for ELL students.
Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
- Statewide-standardized tests are at ELL students' English proficiency level.
Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
- It is fair that ELL students should have to pass the HSPA test to graduate
Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
- The requirement that ELLs take the HSPA test to graduate causes them to drop out.
Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
- The vocabulary words used in the HSPA tests are difficult and higher than ELL students' English proficiency level.
Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
- ELLs receive enough testing support to prepare them for the statewide tests.
Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
- What are the major challenges that ELL students face when taking statewide standardized tests?
- What special testing accommodations are you allowed to make for ELLs during statewide tests? (check all that apply)
 - Additional time to complete test
 - scheduled rest breaks
 - Until the student can no longer continue the activity
 - Administer the test in several sessions
 - Administer the test over several days
 - Highlight key words or phrases in directions
 - Read the test directions but not the test items
 - Read the test directions and test items
 - Native language dictionaries
 - Native language version of test
 - None
 - Other (please specify)

- To what extent are the testing accommodations that English language learners receive during the statewide tests helpful?

Very much	much	a little	not at
all			
- What testing accommodations you think would be more helpful for the ELL students?
- What is the impact of the statewide tests on ELL students (choose all that apply)?
 - Grade retention “no social promotion”
 - Delayed graduation
 - No graduation
 - Drop out
 - Alternative route
 - Referral to Special Education
 - Negative psychological impact
 - No consequences at all
 - Other (please specify)
- What changes, if any, would you recommend in assessment of ELL students?

Appendix B**Teacher Consent Form**

Title of Study: Accountability Issues and High Stakes Standardized Assessment:
Practices, Challenges and Impact for English Language Learners

Principal Investigator: Mary Farah, doctoral student, Rutgers University.

You are invited to participate in a research study that is being conducted by Mary Farah, a doctoral student in the Department of Learning and Teaching, Rutgers University. The purpose of this research is to explore the practices, challenges and impact of high stakes standardized tests for English language learners.

All ESL/ bilingual teachers and content subject teachers who teach English Language Learners (ELLs) are invited to participate in the study. Each individual's participation will last approximately 30-45 minutes. The study procedures include taking part in an audio taped interview that is designed to examine the practices used with English language learners' before and during statewide tests, the challenges ELLs face when taking the tests and the impact of these high stakes standardized achievement tests on ELL students.

There are no foreseeable risks to participation in this study. While English language learners' performance on standardized tests is not likely to change from participation in this research, the study may produce valuable data about English language learners' challenges with high stakes standardized tests. This data may help policymakers determine best policies and practices for assessing English language learners.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, and you may withdraw at any time during the study procedures without any penalty to you. In addition, you may choose not to answer any questions with which you are not comfortable.

Data collection is confidential. Confidential means that the research records will include some information about you, such as [sex, years of experience, subject area]. I will keep this information confidential by limiting individual's access to the research data and keeping it in a secure location. The information will be stored in a locked file cabinet and linked with a code to subject's identity on my password protected computer. That is, if you agree to take part in the study, you will be assigned a random code number, your name will appear only on a list of subjects, and will be linked to the code number that is assigned to you. The principal investigator and the Institutional Review Board at Rutgers University are the only parties that will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. Pseudonyms for the people, schools, and district participating in this study will be used in the final report to maintain anonymity. If a report of this study is published, or the results are presented at a professional conference, only group results will be stated.

P.S. If you agree to participate in the study, please sign the attached form.

If you have any questions about the study procedures, you may contact the researcher Mary Farah

Tel: (xxx) xxx-xxxx

Email: xxxxx@eden.rutgers.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Administrator at Rutgers University at:

Rutgers University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs

ASB III, 3 Rutgers Plaza

New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559

Tel: 848 932-0150

Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu

Appendix C

Teacher Interview Protocol

The following interview questions will be used in an interview with teachers.

- What subject(s) do you teach?
- Please tell me about your own teaching background.
- How many English language learners do you teach?
- How would you describe them (i.e. home countries, language, and schooling)?
- How do ELL students do on the statewide tests (HSPA)? How does this compare to the performance of native English speaking students on these same tests?
- How do you feel about the fact that ELLs have to take the same standardized tests that non-ELL students in the school take?
- Do you feel that the content area statewide tests are at the ELL students' English language proficiency level?
- Do you feel that these standardized tests accurately assess the true knowledge of ELL students? Why? Why not?
- What kind of testing support do you use to prepare students for the statewide tests? For how long?
- How much time do you spend preparing students for the HSPA?
- What are the major challenges that ELL students face when taking these statewide tests?
- What special testing accommodations, if any, do you make for the ELL students during the statewide tests?
- In your view, are these accommodations helpful? Why? Why not?

- What accommodations you think would be more helpful for the ELL students?
- What is the impact of the statewide tests on ELL students?
- What changes, if any, would you recommend in assessment of ELL students?
- Is there anything you would like to share with me that we have not discussed?

Appendix D**Parent/Guardian Consent Form**

Dear Parent/ Guardian:

Your child is being invited to participate in a research study that is being conducted by Mary Farah, who is a doctoral student at Rutgers University. The study is about the challenges that English language learners face when taking statewide tests (e.g. HSPA and the English Language Proficiency test) and the impact (consequences) of these tests on them. The results of the study may help policymakers determine best policies and practices for assessing ESL students.

There are no known risks to your child for participating in this study, and your child will not benefit directly from participation. Your child's grades will not be affected in any way by your decision to let your child participate or not participate in the study. Your child is free to stop participating in the study at any time without any penalty. However, the data collected may lead to increased understanding of the problems that ESL students face when taking the statewide tests. The results of the study may also help teachers and administrators to develop or modify programs that will help ESL students to successfully achieve in the statewide tests.

If you choose to allow your child to participate in this study, he/she will be asked to participate in one interview that will take about 30 minutes. The interview will take place in the school. The interview will be at a time that is convenient for your child so he/she will not miss any instruction time. I will audiotape the interview so that I can remember your child's comments and type them down accurately on my password protected computer. Each student will be given a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality and, if possible, anonymity. All information will be kept confidential and any results published will not show your child's name or any information that would identify him as a participant.

Your child's participation in this study is completely voluntary. Please sign and return the attached permission form to your child's ESL teacher if you are willing to have your child participate. Your support is greatly appreciated. If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact me.

Mary Farah
Tel: (xxx) xxx-xxxx
Email: xxxx@eden.rutgers.edu

If you have any questions about your child's rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at Rutgers University at:

Rutgers University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
ASB III, 3 Rutgers Plaza
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559
Tel: 848 932-0150
Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu

Permission to Interview

Student Name _____

I give my permission for my son/daughter to participate in this research study and be interviewed by Mary Farah. I have read the attached letter and understand that my son/daughter can withdraw from this study at any time.

Parent/Guardian Signature _____ Date _____

Investigator Signature _____ Date _____

I give permission for audio taping my son/daughter interview.

Parent/Guardian Signature _____ Date _____

P.S. Please return this letter to the ESL teacher. You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

THANK YOU!

Sincerely,

Mary Farah

Appendix E

Student Assent Form

Dear Student,

You are invited to take part in a research study about the challenges that you as an English language learner face when taking statewide tests (HSPA and AHSA) as well as the impact (consequences) of these tests on you. This study is being conducted by Mary Farah, who is a doctoral student at Rutgers University. The results of this study may help teachers and administrators to develop or modify programs that will help ELL students to successfully achieve in the statewide tests. The data may also help policymakers determine best policies and practices for assessing English language learners.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in one interview that will take about 30 minutes. The interview will take place in the school. I will audiotape the interview so that I can remember your comments and type them down accurately on my password protected computer. You will be given a pseudonym (false name) to maintain confidentiality and, if possible, anonymity. All information will be kept confidential and any results published will not show your name or any information that would identify you.

Your grades will not be affected in any way by your decision to participate or not participate in the study. You will not receive any benefits from taking part in this study; however, your answers may increase understanding of the challenges, problems and impact of the statewide tests on English language learners.

You may skip any questions that you are not comfortable with, and you may decide to stop participating at any time without any penalty to you. One of your parents/guardian will also be required to provide permission for you to participate in the study, and they will be given my phone number and email, in case you or your parents have any questions about the research. Your parents/guardian will also have a phone number for the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at Rutgers University, in case there are any questions about your rights as a research subject. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

P.S. If you agree to participate in the study, please sign the attached form.

If you have any questions about the study procedures, you may contact the researcher

Mary Farah

Tel: (xxx) xxx-xxxx

Email: mafarah@eden.rutgers.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Administrator at Rutgers University at:

Rutgers University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs

ASB III, 3 Rutgers Plaza

New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559

Tel: 848 932-0150

Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu

Permission to Interview

I agree to participate in this study as stated in this consent form. I have read the attached letter and understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time.

School: _____

Student name (print) _____ Date _____

Student signature _____ Date _____

Investigator signature _____ Date _____

I agree to allow Mary Farah to audiotape the interview.

Student signature _____ Date _____

You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

THANK YOU!

Sincerely,

Mary Farah

Appendix F**ELL student Interview Protocol**

- Where were you born?
- Did you go to school in your home country? How many years?
- When did you first come to the United States?
- How long have you been at this school?
- What is your English language proficiency level?
- What types of classes are you taking? Do you have full access to grade-level classes?
- How do you feel about the fact that you have to take the same standardized tests that non-ELL students in the school take, like the HSPA/AHSA?
- Do you feel that these statewide tests accurately assess your true content knowledge (does it reflect your true level on this subject-area)? Why? Why not?
- How much time does your teacher spend preparing you for the HSPA?
- What kinds of testing support do your content area teachers use to prepare you for the statewide tests?
- Does the ESL teacher do anything special to assist you when you have to take the statewide test?
- What are the major challenges (problems) that you face when taking these statewide tests?
- What special testing accommodations, if any, do you receive during the statewide tests?
- Are these accommodations helpful? Why? Why not?

- What accommodations you think would be more helpful for you?
- What is the impact of these statewide tests on you (consequences if you do not do well on the test)?
- If you could change something about the assessment procedures for ELL students what would that be?
- Is there anything you would like to share with me that we have not discussed?