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"Be Calm, Keep Calm": A Study of Fourth-Grade Students' Experiences of High-Stakes

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"BE CALM, KEEP CALM": A STUDY OF FOURTH-GRADE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF HIGH-STAKES TESTING

Dissertation

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my sweet husband, little boy, friends, and family who encouraged me throughout this process. I would also personally like to thank my mom and dad for showing me the importance of education and always being my personal cheerleaders.

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Abstract

The researcher examined the experiences of fourth-grade students as they prepared for and took the TNReady assessment, which is considered a high-stakes test. The sample size consisted of three boys and two girls who attended a private school located in rural Southeastern Tennessee. Through drawing protocols, interviews, and student writings, the researcher found the boys in this study experienced more anxiety as compared to the girls when it came to preparing and taking the TNReady assessment. The researcher also found that students emphasized the role of the teacher in helping them deal with anxiety that they experienced. Research regarding how elementary-age students experience preparing for and taking high-stake assessments needs to be expanded to understand the effects of high-stakes testing on young students.

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Chapter I: Overview of the Study

Introduction

In 1959, Seymour Sarason wrote, "We live in a test conscious, test-giving culture in which the lives of people are in part determined by their test performance" (p.26). According to a study conducted by Koretz and Hamilton (2006), a significant indicator in the educational reform focused on closing the achievement gap in education titled No Child Left Behind is standardized assessments. No Child Left Behind of 2001, increased the presence of standardized testing in public school classrooms in elementary, middle, and high school (Segool, Carlson, Goforth, EMBSE, & Barterian, 2013). The tests used in the classroom not only became more prevalent but also became high-stakes, and teachers used these tests to determine students' proficiency in tested subjects (Barksdale & Triplett, 2005). The term "high-stakes testing" described any test with significant repercussions for students, teachers, school districts; repercussions included, but were not limited to, retention of students, lower ratings for schools, and decreased funding for school districts (Jones & Egley, 2004).

Beginning with the No Child Left Behind in 2001, makers have used standardized tests as a neutral, impartial, and objective measure of students' competence in the specific content areas (Dutro & Selland, 2012). According to Dutro and Selland (2012), since the inception of NCLB, the focus on high-stakes testing led to many adverse effects on education. In the following chapter, this researcher detailed the problems high-stakes testing caused in education, the

purpose of the resulting study, the theoretical framework through which this researcher viewed the problem of high-stakes testing, the significance of speaking to younger students regarding their experiences with high-stakes testing, as well as described common terms associated with researching the topic of high-stakes testing and children's experiences of taking such tests.

Statement of the Problem

Jones and Egley (2004) found high-stakes testing affected students as their teachers increased teaching to the test and narrowed the curriculum—both of which increased teacher and student anxiety. Popham (2001), defined teaching to the test as educators using actual test items in classroom activities. Narrowing of the curriculum occurred when teachers taught only content and subjects represented in the standardized tests. For example, Jones and Egley (2004) reported 142 Florida teachers "focused on the subjects that were tested to the exclusion of the non-tested subjects such as science, social studies, and health" (p.3). Berliner (2007) found that as teachers increased their emphasis on teaching reading and math and spent more time engaging their students in testing drills, the teachers dedicated less instructional time on non-assessed subjects—subjects such as science, social studies, and the arts—a finding that was more pronounced among teachers of low-income students. Finally, as teachers increasingly relied on using drills to teach, which required the students to engage in repetitive memorization exercises, teachers focused less and less on developing students' higher-order thinking skills and problem-solving abilities (Jones, Jones, Hardin, Chapman, Yarbrough, & Davis, 1999).

Researchers also found that high-stakes testing affected students' emotional state of being. For example, Barksdale and Triplett (2005) found that high-stakes testing contributed to students' low self-esteem, negatively affected students' desire to attend school, and diminished their love of learning. The same researchers also found teachers felt pressure to produce high test scores or risked losing their job, which led to teachers' feelings of anxiousness, disempowerment, and alienation.

Segool et al. (2013) found that the type of anxiety described by Barksdale and Triplett (2005) affected student performance in the classroom and reduced the amount of knowledge that students acquired in content areas. According to Lowe and Lee (2007), an estimated 33% of elementary and secondary students experienced test anxiety. The adverse effects of test anxiety were more pronounced among minority and low-income students (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). Although a research study conducted by Von der Embse and Hasson (2012) suggested elementary students experienced test anxiety, few studies exist to determine the impact, if any, of testing in lower elementary grades.

While there is clear evidence to support that middle and high school students experience test anxiety, there is limited evidence of the effects of high-stakes testing on elementary school-aged students (Segool et al., 2013). The literature is limited concerning students in the lower elementary grades, and how testing affects their impressions of school and long-term academic success. The purpose of this study was to describe the first-person experiences of elementary-

aged children when taking high-stakes tests using a phenomenological method involving dialogic interviews and hermeneutic interpretation.

Phenomenological Research Question

As the researcher, I used a phenomenological approach in this study. Since phenomenological interviews require that questions be open-ended to prevent interviewers from leading participants to a response, the driving research question is limited to asking participants about their lived experience of the phenomenon under study. For this research, I asked fourth-grade participants about their *experiences* of taking standardized, high-stakes tests. Specifically, the central research question used for this study, and the question that began each interview was as follows: As you (a fourth-grade student) think about your experiences with taking high-stakes tests, such as the TNReady assessment, would you describe to me what stood out to you during those test taking experiences?

Theoretical Framework

In the fall of 1975, American social psychologist Donald Campbell developed a theory known as Campbell's Law (Durto & Selland, 2012). The Campbell Law stated, "the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social- decision making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the easier it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it was intended to monitor" (Berliner & Nichols, 2007, p.26).

According to Campbell's Law, the pressure to excel on a single performance carried significant consequences that could have led to the performance being counterproductive and destructive (Berliner & Nicholas, 2007,

p.26). Researchers Madaus and Clarke (2001), noted that if Campbell's Law was correct and educators attached high stakes to test scores, then the educators would have corrupted the testing system and rendered the measurement less accurate.

Campbell's Law proved correct when a school system in Atlanta participated in a large cheating scandal which resulted in criminal punishment for 35 employees. The educators were accused of raising test scores by replacing wrong answers with correct answers (Morgan, 2016). This was also found to be true in other countries where high-stakes testing caused negative outcomes in teachers and students. This is supported in a study conducted in England by the Times Educational Supplement (2008), found pressure related to high stakes testing caused teachers to cheat the system by helping students on standardized tests in order to achieve better results.

The effects of high stakes testing according to Campbell's Law have corrupted the art of teaching and the art of caring provided to students (Berliner & Nicholas, 2007, p.73). According to Berliner and Nicholas (2007), when teachers and administrators' teaching styles are graded by their students' scores, many attributes of a teacher is lost on their students like nurturing a love of learning, individual attention, and extra time meeting with students' families. The corruption of teaching and learning is a result of the high-stakes pressures associated with high-stakes testing. Using Campbell's Law as the lens through which I conducted this research project, I wanted to see if I could find any evidence of testing influencing/corrupting the educational experiences of the fourth-grade students that I interviewed.

Significance of the Project

The significance of studying the testing experiences of fourth grade students was to determine how students experienced testing and what emotions were felt throughout the testing process. The issue of high stakes testing was essential to study because high stakes testing had become prevalent in education (Barksdale & Triplett, 2005). While there many studies that deal with student anxiety in middle school and high school aged children (Embse& Hasson, 2012; Triplett & Barksdale, 2005; Lowe & Lee, 2008), there are few studies that focus on the firsthand account of students' experiences and high stakes testing. Researcher Segool et al., (2013), found little research had been conducted to determine how elementary aged students perceive these annual exams and how students experience anxiety concerning these tests. Barksdale and Triplett (2005), asserted that little was known about elementary-aged students' perceptions of high-stakes testing.

Another significant aspect of this project was the focus on the perceptions of fourth-grade students concerning completing standardized testing. At the time of this study, the literature on how elementary-aged students experienced high stakes testing was sparse.

Finally, this researcher hoped that the results of this study might help teachers and administrators understand how their elementary-aged students experience testing, which could influence how teachers and administrators decide how to better support children as before, during, and after they take high-stakes tests. If results suggested that children experienced adverse emotions during

testing, this study could help lawmakers and educational professionals to design better methods of assessing elementary-aged students.

Description of the Terms

A Nation at Risk of 1983. The National Commission on Excellence in Education conducted a study outlining the failing U.S school system titled A Nation at Risk. The report claimed, "U.S. K-12 educational achievement was on a downward trajectory, and the American economy was imperil" (Guthrie & Springer, 2004). This report focused on test scores as a nation's strength. This act also increased the federal presence of the government in education (p. 7).

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). A measure used to determine if schools are educating all students. Under No Child Left Behind, instituted in 2001, schools tested students in grades 3-8 in reading and mathematics. Students were expected to reach annual achievement targets known as adequate yearly progress (Klein, 2015). Schools who did not meet their AYP within two years were categorized schools that needed improvement and faced corrective and disciplinary actions (Simpson, LaCava, & Graner, 2004).

High-Stakes Testing. For this study, high-stakes testing referred to a series of state assessments whose scores allowed state-level administrators and district-level administrators to decide which schools they would reward and which schools they would punish. The consequences for a school that was punished were severe for students and teachers. Consequences associated with high-stakes testing included student retention, schools' ratings, and monetary incentives for teachers (Jones & Egley, 2004).

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The NCLB bill increased the prevalence and stakes of standardized tests for students in elementary, middle, and high school. This law required state-wide assessments in reading and mathematics in grades 3rd-8th grade, and once in high school (Simpson, LaCava, & Graner, 2004). The goals of NCLB were to raise the achievement level of all students and close the achievement gap between class and race distinctions (Hammond, 2007).

Teacher-created tests. According to Grant and Gareis (2015), a *test* is a "deliberately designed, representative set of written questions and/or prompts to which students respond in written form, intended to measure the acquisition of certain knowledge, skills, and/or dispositions" (p. 20). A teacher-created test is a test created by a teacher to measure how well and how much students have acquired based on a set of standards and curriculum objectives after an interval of teaching.

Testing anxiety. Zeidner (1998) described test anxiety as phenomenological, physiological, and behavioral responses that accompany concern with negative consequences on an exam.

TNReady assessment. According to the Tennessee Department of Education (2017), TNReady was a part of Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP). Specialists who worked for the Tennessee Department of Education designed TNReady to gauge student's understanding and not merely measure students' memorization and test-taking skills. Tennessee used TNReady

as a way of assessing what students know and how to help them become successful in the future.

Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS). This system measured the impact schools and teachers have on students' academic progress. Educators consider students' achievement as well as their growth. The TVAAS measures student growth on a yearly basis. The TVAAS score is used to compare student performances with their peers (Tennessee Department of Education)

Race to the Top. RTT was a grant introduced by President Barak Obama that profoundly increased the standardization, centralization, and test-based accountability in public schools (Onosko, 2011).

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

Historical Overview of Standardized Testing in U.S. Schools

Thomas Jefferson believed it was the responsibility of the U.S. government to "educate and inform the whole mass of the people; they are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty" (p. 3) During the nineteenth century in the New England region, educational reformers Horace Mann of Massachusetts and Henry Barnard of Connecticut established the first formal education system, which was founded on Jefferson's ideas (Thattai, 2001). Until the 1840s, the education system was reserved for the wealthy population and focused strictly on religious studies (Thattai, 2001). Reformers Mann in Massachusetts and Barnard in Connecticut believed that all children should have access to public education, so they published *Common School Journal* to voice their stance to the public (Thattai, 2001). Their efforts resulted in free public education being available to all children in all states by 1918 (Thattai, 2001).

Until 1940, the financial responsibilities for public education fell on the states, which funded schools through local property taxes; local schools reflected the financial means of the area (Thattai, 2001). Before the passing of the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965, the federal government was cautious about interfering with local school districts' decisions on instructional and financial matters (Standerfer, 2006). The lack of federal funding affected the quality of learning for poor children. The Gardner Commission established by John W. Gardner proposed the idea of attaching federal aid to the War on Poverty

policy created by President Johnson (Brady & Thomas, 2016). More specifically, the commission recommended that federal education should target specific needs of students including the education of poor children (Brady & Thomas, 2016). The federal commitment to improving public education for all students resulted in the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Thattai, 2001).

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965

On April 11, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (Brady & Thomas, 2016). President Johnson also passed Title I as a part of ESEA which represented the largest financial component of the Elementary and Secondary Act legislation with the intent "to provide financial assistance to local educational agencies serving areas with high concentrations of children from low-income families to extend and improve their educational programs by various means (Kirst & Jung, 1991, p. 45). The Elementary and Secondary Act provided equal financial educational opportunities to impoverished children and financial resources to improve the education of underprivileged children (Brady & Thomas, 2016). The drafters of the law did not want to overextend the power of the federal government, so they specified that the government could not "exercise any direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum, program of instruction, administration, or personal, or over the selection of any instructional materials in any educational institution or school system" (Pub. L. 89-10, 604). In the 1970s, the public-school system experienced reform in the areas of instruction and the inclusion of special education in the

ESEA, but the advancements did not close the achievement gap between wealthy and middle-class students and disadvantaged students (Standerfer, 2006). The desire to monitor achievement for all, students gave way to the creation of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

National Assessment of Educational Progress

In 1969, Francis Keppel, U.S. Commissioner of Education (1962–1966); John Garner; and Ralph Taylor developed the Exploratory Committee on the Assessment of Progress in Education (Jones, 1996). The goal of this committee was to determine the condition and progress of the American education system (Jones, 1996). This committee created the NAEP, which aimed to report what the nation's citizens knew and what skills students possessed and then to monitor any changes using an objective-referenced assessment (Jones, 1996). This assessment was used—and continued to be used—as a "report card" for the nation's schools. The NAEP monitored changes in achievement in the education system and, most importantly, compared states in the education system. The continued focus on accountability in education from various tools like the NAEP continued to shed light on the success and failures in education. The NAEP influenced education, but *A Nation at Risk* took the spotlight and exposed the flaws in education and promised new methods to repair the broken system (Jones, 1996).

A Nation at Risk

In the 1980s, presidential candidate Ronald Reagan ran on the platform of decreasing the importance of national education and abolishing the Department of Education (Guthrie & Springer, 2006). President Reagan asked Secretary of

Education Terrel Bell to document the declining conditions of public schools. Secretary Bell created a committee that created a report that showed the positive attributions of the public education system. The committee appointed by Bell consisted of many educational professionals, including David P. Gardner and Nobel Prize–winning physicists Glenn Seaborg and Gerald Horton. In 1983, the 12-person committee created *A Nation at Risk*, which claimed that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people" (*A Nation at Risk Report,* U.S. Department of Education, 1983). The committee concluded that the American education system lacked rigorous and measurable standards and expressed the need for higher expectations regarding student performance (U.S. Department of Education, 1983).

The *Nation at Risk* report negatively affected student achievement through its "willingness to define student achievement exclusively by standardized tests, a trend spurred by *A Nation at Risk*'s flawed analysis of test score declines and that many have foreclosed reform of policies regarding equally important aspects of student achievement" (Guthrie & Springer, 2004, p. 9). *A Nation at Risk* sparked public interest in accountability in public schools and led to further investigation of the effectiveness of NAEP testing used to compare scores among the states (Standerfer, 2006).

Goals 2000: Educate America Act.

On March 31, 1994, President Bill Clinton signed into law the Goals 2000: Educate America Act. The law was conceived five years prior by President

George H. W. Bush, who met with every governor at a 1989 education summit. At the summit, Bush agreed to produce a set of educational goals for the entire country (Heise, 1994). Title I of Goals 2000 reflected the National Education Goals discussed and adopted by Bush and the governors in 1990 (Stedman, 1993). Congress developed this act to "promote coherent, nationwide, systemic education reform, to improve the quality of learning and teaching in the classroom and workplace, and to define appropriate and coherent Federal, State, and local roles and responsibilities for education reform" (Goals 2000 Act, PL 103-227, 1994).

The Goals 2000 Act recognized educational policies that have failed in the past and embraced a new systemic approach to reform that focused on "ambitious educational goals, and then compared standards, instructional goals, and periodic assessment to ensure student performance matched the goal" (Heise, 1994, p. 356).

The authors of the Goals 2000 Act established a 19-member National Education Goals panel to launch eight cohesive goals to aid improvement in the education system (Earley, 1994). The goals included in the Goals 2000: Educate America Act were as follows:

1. By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn.
2. By the year 2000, the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90%.

3. By the year 2000, all students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics, and government. Every American school will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our nation's modern economy.
4. By the year 2000, the nation's teaching force will have access to programs for the continued improvement of their professional skills and the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to instruct and prepare all American students for the next century.
5. By the year 2000, U.S. students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.
6. By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
7. By the year 2000, every school in the United States will be free of drugs, violence, and the unauthorized presence of firearms and alcohol and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.

8. By the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children. (Earley, 1994, p. 3)

The Goals 2000 Act was a reminder of the shortcomings of the public education system and attempted to strengthen American students. It increased the control of the federal government over educational policy (Heise, 1994). The *Goals 2000 Act* established performance standards with concrete examples of what students must know and be able to demonstrate that students are proficient in skills and knowledge.

No Child Left Behind of 2001.

On January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. This reform was a reauthorized version of Goals 2000 that sought to establish higher standards and higher expectations to test these standards with greater accountability (Winter, 2001). The central and overarching theme of NCLB was accountability, which included positive academic outcomes and related results (Simpson, LaCava, & Graner, 2004). According to the U.S. Department of Education, the purpose of NCLB was "to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice so that no child is left behind" (NCLB, HR 1, 107th Cong., 2001). NCLB aimed to "boost the performance of various groups of students, such as English-language learners, students in special education, low socioeconomic, and minority children whose achievements trail their peers" (Klein, 2015). The goal of NCLB was for all

subgroups of students to reach 100% proficiency in reading and mathematics before a 12-year deadline (Rose, 2004). This is the point in the NCLB Act where accountability is the focal goal and standardized tests became the tool that measured success or failure.

Under NCLB, students in third through eighth grades completed yearly assessments in reading and mathematics; students in high school took at least one assessment before they completed high school (Klein, 2015). A significant aspect of NCLB was that all schools needed to show proof of improvement on standardized assessments by the year 2012 (Guthrie & Springer, 2004). The measurement tool named Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) was created to determine whether students as a whole population had reached their annual achievement targets (Klein, 2015). According to Smith (2005), AYP was described as "the rate of improvement schools and all subgroups within schools must make each year on tests given by their states toward the goal of 100 percent competence by 2013" (p. 101). NCLB allowed parents to make decisions related to their child's school placement. If a child's school did not meet their AYP goals two years in a row, then students could transfer into a school with a better performance record (Simpson et al., 2004). Schools and school districts that achieved their AYP goals were measured by their scores on standardized tests and received positive public recognition (Simpson et al., 2004).

The consequences of sanctions placed on school districts that did not meet their AYP goals two consecutive years included the mandatory provision of vouchers that allowed students to change schools in their districts, withdrawal of

federal funds, and state takeover (Smith, 2005). Educators had mixed opinions on the effectiveness of NCLB. Its supporters praised its goal of proficiency in reading and mathematics for all students across the United States by the third grade (Klein, 2004). On the other hand, others have described NCLB as a misguided effort whose foundation is unproven by untested strategies (McKenzie, 2003).

Race to the Top. In July 2009, President Barack Obama stated, "America will not succeed in the 21st century unless we do a better job of educating our sons and daughters" (Boser, 2012, p. 1) This quote introduced the Race to the Top (RTT) education incentive, which was $4.35 billion United States Department of Education competitive grant created to spur and reward innovation and reforms in state and local district K-12 education (https://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/factsheet.html). The federal government invited governors through the National Governors Association and chief state school officials through the Council of Chief State School Officers to create the foundational aims of the grant (Onosko, 2011).

The RTT program focused on the creation of conditions in individual states for greater educational innovation (Boser, 2012). The blueprint for RTT laid out four strategies to help close the achievement gap and prepare students for college: adopting more rigorous standards and assessments, recruiting highly effective teachers, improving low-performing schools, and building data systems that measured student success (Boser, 2012). The implementation of the new rigorous standards in RTT gave way to the creation of the National Common Core

Standards. The bulk of the Common Core standards emphasized mathematics and language arts (Onosko, 2011). The aims of RTT faced many problems just as the previous educational reforms that helped form it.

A report conducted by the Center for American Progress, an independent nonpartisan institute representing issues in education, concluded:

> We suffer under no illusion that a single competitive grant program will sustain a total revamping of the nation's education system. Nor do we believe that a program like Race to the Top will be implemented correctly as it was imagined—one of the goals of the program was to figure out what works when it comes to education reform. (p. 5)

The outlook for the success of RTT shifted the view of education from a child's interests and talents to the primary goals of reading, skills in computation, and the possession of workplace skills (Onosko, 2011). Onosko goes on to say, "Obama's continued hyper focus on high-stakes testing in two subjects will only perpetuate nearly two decades of stagnant mathematic and reading achievement among our nation's youth" (p. 4).

The history of policies that have shaped the modern era of high stakes testing in education is a collection of laws and policies aimed at improving public education for all students. Every educational policy since the Elementary and Secondary Act increased the presence of the federal government in public education policy and increased the accountability and expectations for students and teachers mainly through an increasing reliance on standardized testing. At the

time of this writing, due to the rigorous expectations set forth by NCLB and RTT, standardized testing was the primary means by which many school systems demonstrated that their students were progressing educationally.

Effects of Testing on Middle and High School Students

The practice of children taking high-stakes tests had grown in prominence since legislation, such as No Child Left Behind have contributed to the practice of children taking high-stakes tests throughout their K-12 educational career (Embse & Hasson, 2012). The state-mandated testing programs, particularly the ones with high stakes affected teachers, and students by increasing stress, anxiety, and decreased motivation (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madus, 2003). A report by Barksdale and Triplett (2005) stated that education experienced a large-scale test presence in the classroom. Though testing increased, research lacked focus on test anxiety and student achievement (Segool et al.2013). A study conducted by Hill and Wigfield (1984) showed 10% of elementary and middle school–aged students experienced test anxiety on a level that impaired their academic ability.

Test anxiety is defined as a specific reaction to an examination situation in which an individual is evaluated in some form (Dan & Raz, 2015). The physical reactions to test anxiety can negatively affect students in the classroom. The researchers Segool et al. (2013) found that students experienced increased heart rate and muscle tightness during a state standardized test. Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas (2000), interviewed 59 teachers in a large southern state and 24 teachers in a northern state. The participants all taught reading and writing in first grade through eighth grade. The researchers conducted interviews with three focus

groups composed of six teachers in each group. The remaining 41 teachers were interviewed individually. The focus group questions dealt with how teachers learned from policies and standards, how teachers prepared to administer the test, and how they felt classroom instruction was influenced by testing. The researchers used a phenomenological approach to analyze the data. Each researcher then transcribed interviews to find categories and established themes. The study concluded that teachers witnessed students react to tests in specific physical ways, such as crying, headaches, panic, irritability, and loss of sleep, during periods of high-stakes testing.

In a study conducted by Barksdale and Triplett (2005), 225 students ranging from third grade to sixth grade described various feelings ranging from sadness to anger and nervousness when subjected to high-stakes testing. The physical reaction to anxiety was an essential aspect of how students experienced stress. Segool et al. (2013), cited studies conducted on the emotional effects of testing that suggested students who experienced increased anxiety showed lower motivation.

Jones and Egley's (2004) study included interviews of 708 third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade teachers in Florida that allowed the authors insight to the effects of high-stakes testing on teachers. The participants completed an online questionnaire designed to question the impact of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. The researchers chose Florida because of its "wide range of urban and rural schools" (Jones & Egley, 2004). The results revealed teachers' concerns about the adverse effects of high stakes testing on students who

previously identified as stressed and anxious. The study also found that it can be difficult for students who already experience low academic ability and low self-esteem to perform proficiently on the tests.

Previous research on test anxiety conducted on middle school–aged students focused on the negative effects on students' academic performance. In a study conducted by researchers Segool et al. (2013), 617 children in third, fourth, and fifth grades were interviewed. The researchers measured students' test anxiety using two scales. The first scale was the Children's Test Anxiety Scale (CTAS). The CTAS used 30 questions to assess children's thoughts and physiological response to testing. The researchers created a four-point Likert scale that ranged from *almost never to almost always* for students to rate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with a statement. The second scale was the Behavior Assessment Scale for Children (BASC). The BASC is made up of seven questions where students self-reported their feelings of fear regarding test taking. The researchers found that students who experience high levels of anxiety are more likely to drop out. Jones and Egley (2004), in their paper "Voices from the Frontline: Teachers' Perceptions of High-Stakes Testing," studied the effects of high-stakes testing on students' performance from the perspective of teachers in Florida. In this study, students reported experiencing stress and pressure when they took standardized tests. One teacher said, "In our school, I heard of some students crying in the morning or vomiting on the test because of so much pressure. It is ridiculous!" (p. 19).

Effects of Testing on Subgroups of Students

The report *A Nation at Risk* dealt with the state of education in America, and while many people disagreed with the findings, a few positive changes were made in response to the report. Focus increased on the achievement gap between low-income students and middle- and upper-class students (Guthrie & Springer, 2004). The authors of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) sought to "close the achievement gap between high and low performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and non-minority students and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers" (NCLB: Congress, 2002, p. 1) As educators responded to the *A Nation at Risk* report and the NCLB Act, the results of high-stakes testing became the most influential indicator of student success.

High stakes testing that occurred as a result of NCLB had a wide range of consequences for different groups of students (Embse & Hasson, 2012). A study conducted by Embse and Hasson (2012) found that testing associated with NCLB increased the amount of stress on students from ethnic minority and low-socioeconomic backgrounds. study conducted by Morgan (2016) found teachers who worked in poverty-stricken schools served underperforming students often used drilling and memorization techniques that lead to little learning Minarechova (2012), provided another example of how disadvantaged students struggled during testing. The researcher found two out of three students from low- income schools failed tests in mathematics, English, and reading tests while students from wealthier families had more success. Embse and Hasson (2012) found schools

facing AYP sanctions were in higher concentrations in urban settings. The study also found that suburban, low-poverty schools were 22 times more likely to reach levels of high academic performance (p. 181).

In the study of Turner, Beidel, Hughes, and Turner (1993), 195 students (143 white and 52 African American) were screened for test anxiety. The researchers used the Test Anxiety Scale for Children (TASC) and found that 41% of African Americans experienced test anxiety in the classroom (Turner et al., 1993). A study completed by the Harvard Civil Rights Project in 2004, highlighted a national crisis in graduation rates among African American and Latino students as a result of NCLB (Orfield, Losen, & Wald, 2004). Specifically, the researchers found that Latino and African American students graduated at a rate lower than Caucasian students in some states (Orfield et al., 2004).

The NCLB mandate required schools to include graduation rates in their accountability report, but a study completed by Berliner and Nicholas (2008) found that requirements of advancing students toward the proficient level were not being carried out on the school level. Hammond (2007) reported that the students who were the neediest under NCLB, including English language learners, special need students, and low socioeconomic students were the students who were impacted negatively from the educational policy.

> As evidence of its unintended consequences emerges, it seems increasingly clear that NCLB as currently implemented is more likely to harm most of the students who are the targets of its aspirations than to help them, and it is more likely to undermine—some would even say destroy—

> the nation's public education system than to improve it. These outcomes are likely because the underfunded layers onto a grossly unequal school system a set of unmeetable test score targets that disproportionately penalize schools serving the neediest students, while creating strong incentives for schools to keep out or push out those students who are low achieving in order to raise school average test scores. (p. 246)

In their book Berliner and Nicholas (2007), collected information based on other researchers that stated students from diverse populations, including those with poverty and individual learning needs, often failed standardized tests, and these populations of students were denied quality educational opportunities. According to the available literature on test anxiety, the issue was not limited to students who are identified as low socioeconomic. NCLB required schools to report all test results of student subgroups who faced academic challenges with the public-school system, including minorities, students with disabilities, impoverished students, and English-language learners (ELLs) (Eckes & Swando, 2009).

Wright (2002) conducted a study with teachers in an inner-city elementary school to determine how students handled standardized testing. The school Wright selected was labeled as underperforming, with a large ELL population. The researcher conducted interviews with five second-grade teachers because testing began in second grade. The group also included a first-grade teacher because all first-grade students were tested as well. The last teacher interviewed was a kindergarten teacher to determine if the standardized tests influenced

students' first year of school. The researcher also used observations and document analyses that were generated by school and district documents.

Wright's results matched several studies (Amrein, Berliner, & Biddle, 2002; Haney, 2000) prior to his research that claimed ELL students typically do not perform well on high-stakes testing. These findings contradict the claims of the proponents of NCLB that ELL students would benefit from the measures found in NCLB. The NCLB mandate also made it difficult for schools to serve new ELLs and students with disabilities due to subgroups not reaching 100% proficiency (Hammond, 2007).

As Wright found in his 2002 study, all five teachers who participated in the interview expressed concern for students who were not proficient in the English language. A teacher named Bianca who participated in the study said, "Of course it's not fair! It's just like if I were tested in another language, where I would be classified as the bottom of the 20th percentile" (Wright, 2002, p. 9). In their book Berliner and Nicholas (2007), gathered information from other researchers and found that English-limited speaking students felt intimidated by NCLB mandates that required the English-limited students to complete exams in a secondary language. A report in North Carolina showed that passing rates for 2002 reading and mathematics were 87% for students with English as their first language compared with 38% for ELL students (Berliner & Nicholas, 2008). In New Jersey, the 2003 passing rate in mathematics for native English-speaking students reached 77% while the passing rate in mathematics for ELL students was only 22% (Berliner & Nicholas, 2008).

As demonstrated in the above review of the literature, researchers have studied test anxiety in middle and high school students, and they have studied test anxiety as it relates to minorities, students with disabilities, and students with impoverished backgrounds. What is missing though is the substantial work in the area of how testing directly affects students in elementary school.

Effects of Testing on Teachers

Beginning in 2002, the NCLB required district and school administrators to measure student progress based on students' scores on standardized tests (Embse & Hasson, 2012). Furthermore, with students' progress being tied to high-stakes test results, politicians, parents, and communities have held teachers responsible for making sure that students perform well on the high-stakes test (Barksdale & Triplett, 2005). Costigan (2002) interviewed six new teachers near the end of their first semester to gain understanding of how testing affected the new teachers' teaching. The teachers taught in third through fifth grades in an urban residential neighborhood in New York. The new teachers stated that testing negatively affected their students and their teaching practices. They reported that testing had become a primary focus of their daily classroom practices (Costigan, 2002).

In addition to studying the effects of testing on middle and high school–aged students and the effects of testing on students who are members of minority groups, researchers have also investigated the effects of testing on teachers in the classroom. Researchers who conducted a study in North Carolina regarding increased testing showed teachers reported a narrowing of the curriculum as a

result of standardized testing (Jones et al.1999). A significant concern identified by research in the literature dealt with the changes to the curriculum made to accommodate testing requirements. One effect of high-stakes testing was how the required standardized tests narrowed curricula and limited teachers' input regarding their instruction (Wagner, 2003). Although some research asserted that testing forced teachers to narrow the curriculum to focus on the tested subjects such as math, language arts, science and history, other research found that testing helped teachers align their curriculum and helped teachers elevate the quality of their lessons (Jones & Egley, 2004). According to a group of teachers in Ohio, "Testing helped the school system align curriculum between grade levels, helped educators identify weaknesses, and made educators aware of educational outcomes" (DeBard & Kubow, 2002, p. 396). On the other hand, in a study by Tye and O'Brien (2002) where the researchers interviewed educators who left the teaching profession, one participant stated, "I don't mind standards, but too much emphasis is placed on testing. It has taken the fun out of it, and you feel like you don't have time for art, PE, music, etc." (p. 27).

Jones and Egley (2004) concluded that 13.1% of teachers in Florida felt that testing narrowed the curriculum, and the teachers were concerned that students did not receive a well-rounded education. One teacher claimed, "Our total curriculum is focused on reading, writing, and math. There is no extra time for students to study the arts, have physical education, science, or social studies. Our curriculum is very unbalanced" (Jones & Egley, 2004, p. 15). The results of a survey administered by Renter et al. (2006) showed that 71% of the districts the

authors surveyed reported cutting at least one subject to increase time spent on reading and mathematics as a direct response to the high-stakes testing mandated under NCLB. Berliner (2007) explained that the curriculum laid out the blueprint of the information required to be presented by teachers, but it was up to the teachers to decide on effective ways to transmit information to their students Au (2009) asserted that many educators changed their instructional practices to meet the requirements of learning.

Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, (2001) found that teachers felt compelled to engage in test preparation instead of spending time teaching their actual curriculum. In the words of 23.2% of teachers who participated in the study; the teachers used the words "a lot" of time was spent on test prep and "teaching to the test" (Jones & Egley, 2004). Sacks (2000) asserted that teaching to the test led to a "dumbing-down" effect on both teaching and learning. Specifically, when teachers taught to a test, they were more likely to depend on tools like worksheets, drills, and practice tests, which consumed large amounts of instruction time (Sacks, 2000). An educator in Florida stated, "I can say one thing: if my kids learn one thing in third grade, it is how to pass a standardized test even if they are not familiar with the material" (Jones & Egley, 2004, p. 17). A result of the pressure to perform at a proficient level drove some teachers to alter instructional practices, such as focused attention on memorization, and teaching lower- order thinking skills that were not in the best interest of their students (Au, 2009). Popham (2002) found that teachers drilled on test content, eliminated curricular

content, and provided long instructional sessions that incorporated items found on actual tests.

Another topic that surfaced in the literature regarding the effects of high stakes testing was student and teacher motivation. The study conducted by Jones and Egley (2004) found student and teacher motivation was heavily weighted to the negative. Educators in this study also claimed that testing negatively affected their love of learning and interest in school (p. 19).

Segool et al. (2013), asserted that testing programs not only increased students' anxiety level and decreased students' motivation but also increased teachers' job stress. The researchers found that a teacher's anxiety may indirectly affect student anxiety. The study conducted by Jones and Egley (2004) found that 22.5% of teachers in Florida felt pressure and stress from tests. In a study conducted by Jones et al. (1999), 236 teachers within 16 elementary schools located in five districts across North Carolina were interviewed. The teachers were asked in a survey to describe if their instruction had changed due to the state accountability program enacted in North Carolina. Two-thirds of the teachers reported they increased their instruction on reading, writing, and mathematics. The researchers also asked the teachers if their morale had been affected by testing. A total of 77% cited a decrease in morale, and 76% reported that teaching was more stressful due to state tests. A study conducted by Smith (1990) showed that teachers felt shame, embarrassment, guilt, and anger over test scores published under NCLB. The source of frustration related to published scores was the belief that tests did not show their students' abilities (Hoffman et al., 2001).

A prominent theme found in the literature concerning the lasting effects of testing on the teaching profession revolved around the loss of experienced teachers. A study conducted by Tye and O'Brien (2002), interviewed a group of teachers who left the teaching profession or considered changing careers to gauge their reasons. Those who left teaching cited the pressures of increased accountability, test preparation, and standards as their reason for leaving the profession. In a similar study conducted by Hoffman et al. (2001), the researchers interviewed 200 teachers in Texas to examine the ways in which the Texas Assessment of Academic Skill (TAAS) affects teachers, students, and instruction. The participants were all members of the Texas State Reading Association. The survey used in the study consisted of 113 items that dealt with demographic information, general attitudes of the respondent, perceived attitudes of others, test preparation, and effects of the TAAS on students. The results showed many teachers left the teaching profession due to stress and anxiety. An educator in that interview cited "because of the restraints the tests place on decision making and the pressures placed on them and their students" (Hoffman et al., 2001, p. 488). Jones and Egley (2004) found that 3% of teachers in their study felt that their motivation to remain teachers had decreased and that teachers were now more likely to leave the profession.

Effects of Testing on Kindergarten through Third-Grade Students

At the time of this study, the literature was limited regarding the effects of high stakes testing on younger children and the long-term effects on students' emotional perceptions of school and learning. A study led by Fleege,

Charlesworth, Burts, and Hart (1992) examined the effects of standardized testing on kindergartners. The research consisted of a sample size of 36 kindergarten-aged children from two classrooms in a southeastern metropolitan school district. The purpose of the study was to determine if children changed their behavior during a testing period as compared with a normal classroom activity. The researchers spent seven weeks of observation in the two kindergarten classrooms. The observations were conducted before, during, and after the California Achievement Test (CAT). The CAT is a pencil-and-paper achievement test. The researchers gave the children the CAT for five straight days for one hour each day. The researchers observed children in one classroom for four weeks and observed students in the second classroom for three weeks. The researchers used the Child Stress Behavior Instrument in the first classroom as their quantitative method. Once all the data were gathered, Fleege et al. analyzed by coding to categorize incidents throughout the test period. The researchers used audio and video taping to triangulate the data. The qualitative data suggested students who were exposed to high-stakes testing at a young age displayed increased stress-related behaviors. One student cried during the test and refused to come to school the next day. One finding showed students who answered questions incorrectly on the test were able to answer the same question orally during the interviews. The students' responses indicated they did not like the testing experience.

The study conducted by Fleege et al. (1992) compared the behaviors of students before and after completing a standardized test; the students' responses showed stress-related actions as a result of the exam. During the exam,

researchers observed that “many children wiggled or squirmed frequently, chewed on their pencils, played with their clothes, and complained of being tired. These behaviors were observed infrequently before and after the test” (Fleege et al., 1992).

The physical and emotional reactions of students are found throughout a small number of studies, but a survey conducted by Barksdale and Triplett (2005) dealt with third- through sixth-grade students’ emotions. Their results echoed those of previous studies. Barksdale and Triplett (2005) examined students in third through sixth grades about their feelings during standardized tests. The researchers selected 225 third through sixth graders to participate in the study. The students were selected from five schools with a diverse population of students. The researchers asked teachers from five elementary schools to volunteer their students. The teachers asked the students to draw and write about their most recent testing experience. The students drew pictures of their emotions and the reactions they felt while taking a standardized test. The second part of the survey consisted of a writing prompt that asked students to write about their picture. The researchers analyzed the data using a constant comparative analysis that focused on categorizing data. The researchers met to discuss the drawings and generated themes found throughout the drawings. They agreed on nine themes found throughout the drawings with all categories supported by the drawings and writings. The results showed that the students experienced anxiety, anger, panic, and frustration because of pressures associated with standardized testing. The theme of emotion topped the list at 32% because the students’

drawings dealt with some form of emotion. The most prevalent emotion was nervousness as students were nervous about not finishing the test and not being able to figure out the right answer. The second most used emotion was anger. The following was expressed by a child:

> I felt mad and frustrated about HST and was feeling so mad I felt like I wanted to yell. But I did not and I felt like I was in a crazy house and I got even more mad when it got harder, then we took a break, then I felt a little good. But the second half I felt like I wanted to cry and I started feeling like I wanted to spit on the test. But then we finished. (p. 245)

The validity of using one standardized test to determine important educational processes like retention and promotion is questioned by educators. It could be beneficial to students if schools used an array of assessments to gauge whether students advanced to the next grade level or were held behind. In this study, the role of teachers played an important part. One student reported, "Mr. Z wrote GOOD LUCK on the board in big letters, so I felt better" (p. 257). The students reported less anxiety when their teacher assumed the role of a comforter and helped them feel confident about themselves and alleviate their feelings of powerlessness.

Segool, Carlson, Goforth, Von Der Embse, and Barterian (2013) also observed anxious responses in elementary-aged children when taking high-stakes tests. What differentiated their study from that of Fleege et al. (1992) and Barksdale and Triplett (2005) was that Segool et al. (2013) were able to differentiate how differently the elementary students responded to teacher-made

tests compared to how they responded to high-stakes tests. Specifically, Segool et al. (2013) found the elementary-aged students reported low anxiety in the classroom testing environment, while those same students experienced more anxiety when taking the year-end NCLB assessments.

Summary of the Review of the Literature

At the time of this study, the effects of high-stakes testing were far-reaching throughout the education world. The pressures associated with testing influenced curriculum choices, affected educators' instructional methods, and increased anxiety among students and teachers. The research demonstrated that high-stakes testing created unhealthy classroom environments (Dutro & Selland, 2012).

Berliner and Nicholas (2007) discovered that when teachers are judged by students' scores, their contributions, such as nurturing a love for learning, giving individual attention to counseling in a student's time of need, and spending time meeting with students and their families, are diminished (p. 24). The more worrisome effect of testing is damage to children's self-esteem, overall morale, and love of learning (Hargrove, Jones, Jones, Hardin, Chapman, & Davis, 2000).

The presence of standardized tests in our schools increased in the past twenty years and, at the time of this study, did not show signs of stopping (Barksdale & Triplett, 2005). The research, however, was lacking when it came to how testing affects lower elementary-aged children who complete these tests along with all other students and their perceptions of high-stakes testing (Barksdale & Triplett, 2005). Fleege et al. (1992) asserted that studying the

effects of high stakes testing on younger students is critical because testing is ingrained in our education system, and we must understand how testing affects students as they grow.

Chapter III: Methodology

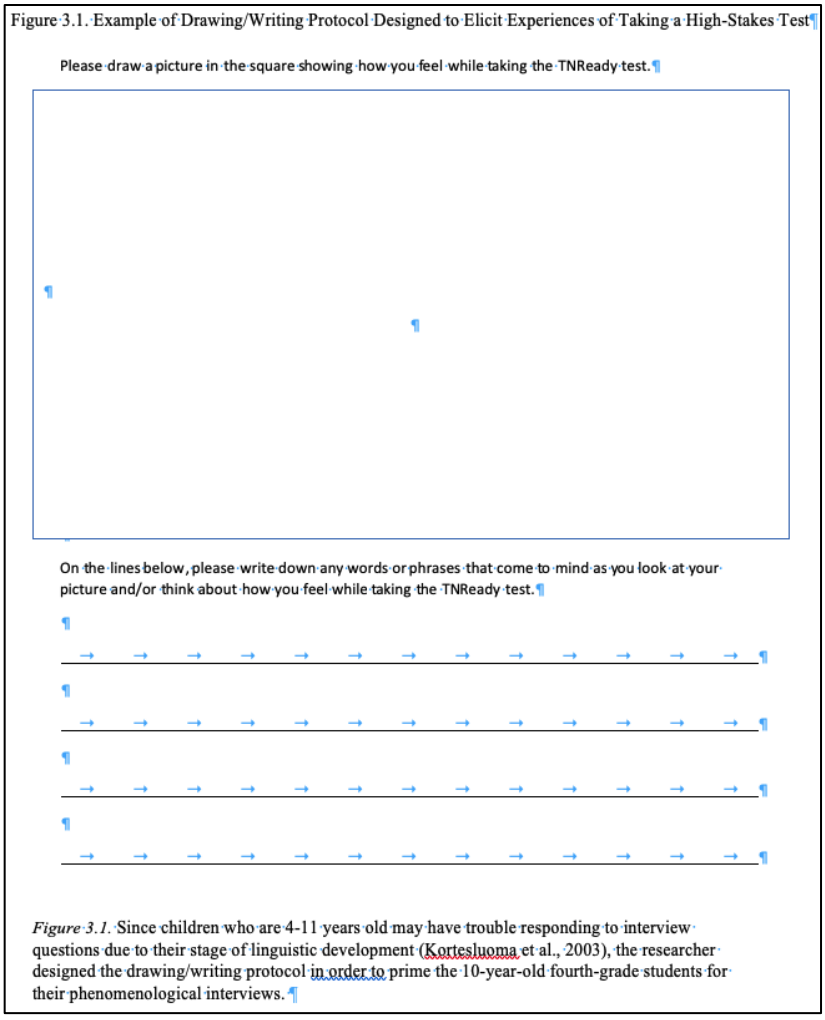
The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of elementary-aged children when taking high-stakes tests. The researcher used a phenomenological approach in this study, which required the researcher to ask fourth-graders open-ended questions. The goal of using this interview technique was to learn from the fourth-grade students what they experienced as they took high-stakes tests for the fourth graders the final authority concerning their experiences (Thomas and Pollio, 2002). The following chapter details the researcher's research design, analytical methods, trustworthiness, limitations/delimitations, and assumptions/biases of the study.

Research Design

The researcher designed this study as a phenomenological qualitative study. The researcher found the phenomenological method most appropriate due to the researcher's attempt to gain understanding of students' experiences with high-stakes testing. The researchers Danaher and Briod (2005) pointed out that phenomenological research involving children aimed to clarify, describe, and interpret children's unique way of make sense of their world. Christensen, Johnson, and Turner (2010) explained that a primary objective of a phenomenological study was to explicate the meaning and essence of a lived experience of a person, or a group of people, around a certain event.

The researcher followed a phenomenological qualitative study design to collect and analyze data for the study. The researcher used two main tools as a mean of data collection. The first instrument was a drawing protocol designed by

the researcher for the purpose helping the fourth graders prepare to talk about their experiences. In her book Malchiodi (1998), stated " children's drawings are thought to reflect their inner worlds, depicting various feelings and relating information" (p.1) The drawing protocol consisted of a space for students to draw their experiences and the second section consisted of a space for the writing portion of the drawing. This writing space allowed students to examine their drawing in their own words (see Figure 3.1). The second method of data collection was an in-depth interview with each participant to allow further explanation of their experiences.



Setting in Context

The setting of this study was Anderson Baker Academy (a pseudonym), which was a private, college-preparatory school located on the campus of a private university in the southeastern region of the United States. At the time of this research, Anderson Baker Academy had 147 students in grades 4th through 12th grade and served students from three southeastern states. The student population was 90% Caucasian and 10 % Asian. Students who transferred into Anderson Baker Academy had a 2.0 grade point average. Anderson Baker Academy consisted of one building where all academic classrooms took place and a gymnasium located next to the main building. Anderson Baker Academy employed 17 instructors, many of whom were certified in multiple content areas and taught multiple subject areas.

Participants in the study

The final number of participants for this study consisted of five fourth-grade students, all of whom returned their consent forms to participate in the study. The total number of students in the targeted classroom totaled eight; however, only five students out of the eight returned the required documentation to participate in the study. The breakdown of the participants consisted of three boys and two girls, all of whom were Caucasian. To ensure anonymity, each participant chose her or his own pseudonym to be used for the study. The two girls chose the names Luna Love Girl and Rosie. The three boys in the study chose the names, The Fantastic Gary, The Coop Man, and Alex (see Table 3.1).

The researcher omitted from the study all identifying information related to the fourth graders to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality.

Table 3.2

Participants' Self-Selected Pseudonyms

Pseudonyms	Gender
Luna Love Girl	Female
Rosie	Female
The Coop Man	Male
The Fantastic Gary	Male
Alex	Male

Data Collection

The researcher began the study by contacting the principal of Anderson Baker Academy to ask permission to interview fourth-grade students regarding the phenomenon of taking the TNReady standardized assessment. Once the principal signed an informed consent form that granted the researcher permission to conduct the study at Anderson Baker Academy, the researcher contacted the teacher of the fourth-grade classroom and obtained her permission, through a written consent form, to interview the fourth-grade students in her classroom.

With permission from the Institutional Review Board, the researcher delivered to the classroom teacher a guardian consent form, a student assent form, and an empty envelope with the researcher's name on the outside of the envelope

to each child in the fourth-grade classroom. The teacher distributed the consent and assent forms to the students with the instructions to have their guardians read the contents, discuss participating in the research with the child, and sign the consent form if the guardian granted permission for the child to participate in the research. Signed guardian consent forms and child assent forms were placed in the sealed envelope and returned to the classroom teacher. The classroom teacher gave the sealed envelope to the researcher. The researcher discussed with the fourth-grade teacher to determine a good time to come into the classroom and conduct the research. The teacher and researcher agreed on a date to conduct the research soon after the students finished taking the standardized TNReady assessment.

Stage one—collecting initial impressions. The researcher designed a drawing protocol that contained space for students to draw how they felt while completing a standardized test as well as a few lines to jot down a few words that came to mind as they drew. The classroom teacher assured the students that the drawing would not count toward test scores or grades and only the researcher would see the drawing. The researcher distributed the pre-numbered drawing/writing forms to each fourth-grade student for whom the researcher collected guardian permission as well as the student assent forms. The researcher introduced the activity to the students and drawing protocol consisted of two parts. The researcher introduced the activity and said "*I'm interested in all that you experienced as you took the TNReady test and thank you for your help! On the paper I've given you, please draw in the rectangle that showed what you*

experienced before the test, during the test, or after the test. You can draw about what you thought or draw what emotion/feeling stood out to you most. The researcher anticipated that the fourth-grade students required approximately 25 minutes to complete the drawing portion.

Once each participant had ample time to complete her or his drawing, the researcher gave the next set of instructions: " *Now that you have a picture of what stood out to you that shows what you were thinking or feeling at any time that you were taking the test, now I would like for you to write down as many words, phrases, or sentences that describe your picture and what you experienced. Don't worry about spelling or writing in complete sentences-just write as much to describe your picture and your experience. If four lines are not enough room for you, please use the back of the paper.* The researcher anticipated that fourth-grade students required approximately 20 minutes to complete the writing portion.

The researcher allowed additional time for students if they felt the allotted time was not enough for either the drawing or writing portion. The researcher was present in the classroom the entire time while students completed the task. At the end of the allotted time, the researcher collected the papers from the students and placed them in an envelope. To ensure complete confidentiality, each numbered drawing/writing form was associated with a pseudonym determined and recorded by the researcher. The researcher gathered the envelopes and began pulling students to conduct an interview.

Stage two—conducting phenomenological interviews. Immediately following the drawing/writing protocol, the researcher began conducting

interviews with individual students. To minimize distractions, the interviews took place in a vacant classroom away for other students but still in a public place. The interviewer anticipated that interviews could range from twenty to forty minutes. In an event of an interview lasted longer, the researcher allowed the student extra time to finish the interview. Ideally, the researcher wanted to complete interviews with the fourth-grade students in two days to minimize any disruptions to school schedules.

The researcher began each phenomenological interview with an open-ended question about the participants' experiences of taking the TNReady standardized test. To help a student recall her or his initial thoughts/emotions/feelings, the researcher shared with the student the drawing/writing form that the child completed during stage one of the research project. The researcher said, "As *you look at what you drew and the words you used to describe your experience of taking the TNReady test, tell me what stood out to during that experience.''*

Phenomenological interviews were designed to get a participant's "lived experience"; thus, phenomenological interviews are unstructured, and subsequent questions arise from the content of the interview (Thomas and Pollio, 2002). Follow up questions were intended to assist the interviewees focus on their experiences as they described it and helped the researcher clarify what the participant meant if she feels she misunderstood something the participant said (Thomas and Pollio, 2002). In this study, the researcher followed up with questions such as "What was that like for you?" or prompted participants to "Tell

me more" to ensure the fourth-grade students went into as much detail as possible. During the interview, the researcher used a handheld recorder. This recorder was a device that was not connected to the Internet so the information could not be accessed by anyone other than the researcher. Once students indicated that there were no more descriptions of their experiences to be communicated, the researcher summarized to the participants, as completely as she could, her understanding of the participants' descriptions of testing experience. Summarizing the researcher's understanding of the participants' descriptions of their testing experiences allowed the participants to clarify any misunderstandings and allowed them the opportunity to elaborate on any points that they believed needed more description. Once participants were satisfied that the researcher summarized their experiences accurately, the researcher provided the participants with a final chance to add any information they wanted to add. Once the students fully discussed their experiences, the researcher thanked them for their time and concluded the interviews. After the interviews were completed, the researcher transcribed the interviews. The transcriptions were kept on a password protected, external hard drive.

Methods of Analysis

The researcher analyzed the data using comparative analysis, a form of analytic induction that simplifies the process of examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data (Triplett & Barksdale, 2005). The researcher's analysis of the data began during the interview process as the researcher recorded observational notes about the fourth-graders' pictures they

drew, the words they wrote, any non-verbal cues, their pauses during speaking, or any notable aspect of their language in general. The researcher manually transcribed the interview recordings as soon after the interview as possible, reread the transcriptions several times, wrote notes in the margins of the interviews, and wrote reflections about the content in my field journal (Maxwell, 2013). The preliminary thoughts and information primed the researcher for the next stage, which involved the first stages of coding for themes.

The next step completed by the researcher consisted of using the technique of open coding to find connections among the transcripts. The process of open coding consists of making notations next to pieces of data that are relevant to answer your research questions and in the beginning the researcher is open to any idea (Merriam, & Tisdell, 2016) As the researcher listened, transcribed, and began analyzing the interview transcripts, the researcher made notes of reoccurring words found throughout the transcripts. The researcher also searched the participants' pictures and writing for the same reoccurring words. This stage led to the next stage in coding which consisted of establishing categories for notes and observations.

The researcher practiced analytical coding which established categories based on the information found in the drawings and interviews. For example, the researcher examined each drawing, and if emotional words such as angry, sad, happy, or nervous appeared, the researcher created a respective emotions category. This technique of coding provided insight into how students experienced the TNReady assessment. The researcher then took the transcribed

interviews and used the program NVivo which allowed the researcher to upload the transcribes and NVivo further sorted the information into categories. The results from NVivo presented the information in a numerical form and created a graph that showed how each category was represented. The researcher used those notes along with the initial notes and determined four major themes were covered in the document analysis of the study.

Trustworthiness

A potential weakness of phenomenological research from the standpoint of traditional science is that phenomenological research is not measurable through steps such as the scientific method. The aim of phenomenological research based on Husserl was "the rigorous unbiased study of things as they appear so that one might come to an essential understanding of human consciousness and experience" (Valle & Halling, 1989, p.6). To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher employed the use of thick description derived from face to face interviews and a rigorous analysis of the data.

The researcher's own influence as a former elementary school teacher in both a public-school setting and a private-school setting held the potential of creating reliability issues through the interview process and required attention to reflexivity (Creswell, 2014; McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). By the researcher debriefing with a peer and using a field log to jot observations and notes before/during/after the interviews, the researcher was able to remain mindful of how her personal/professional experiences could possible influence her interpretation on the data (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015). The researcher also used

a computer assisted qualitative data analysis program, NVivo, to ensure that her coding and resulting thematic analysis was accurate and reliable. The researcher entered the transcribed interviews into NVivo, and the program found themes based on repeated words and phrases, which aligned with the researcher's open and axial coding of the data.

The researcher's clear presentation of research methods, the role of the researcher, and the description of the sampling, data collection strategies, and data analysis implemented provide for the transferability of the study (Shenton, 2004). Finally, the researcher provided each family member of the fourth-graders who participated in the study with an informed consent agreement, and the researcher provided each fourth-grader with an assent agreement. Furthermore, the researcher kept anonymous the participating school and teacher within the data as a means of not only bolstering the trustworthiness of the data, but also ensuring anonymity and safety for participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014; Shenton, 2004).

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations. Price and Murnan (2013) explained that a limitation in any research study was when a systematic biased condition existed that the researcher could not control, a condition that could inappropriately impact the results of the study. The greatest limitation of this study was the reluctance of public-school district leaders and building level principals to allow the researcher to talk to fourth-grade students about their experiences of standardized testing. The researcher approached eight different schools/school districts to be allowed access

to interview students. The schools consisted of asking two private Christian schools and six public school districts located in southeast Tennessee. The private Christian schools did not participate in this study because they did not administer the TNReady assessment, but an alternative assessment. The public schools were not open to the idea of someone coming in and talking about testing. One response given from a school district was "we do not allow outside people coming in because we have had problems in the past" (School A). Similarly, a more standard came in the form of "We are not interested in participating in your study at this time" (School B). The difficulty of access to schools lead the researcher to seek participation from a private school in named Anderson Baker Academy in Southeast Tennessee. The limited participation of local schools affected the sample size of the study.

Similarly, another limitation of the study was that not all guardians allowed their children to participate in the study. Once the principal of Anderson Baker Academy granted the researcher permission to interview the students in a fourth-grade classroom, the class consisted of only eight students. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), postulated that 6-12 interviews seem to be an ideal number of qualitative interviews needed to reach saturation; however, this researcher was able to interview only five fourth graders out of the potential eight.

A third limitation of this researcher was that all five of the fourth-graders that this researcher interviewed were Caucasian. Anderson Baker Academy's student population is 90% Caucasian and no minorities or marginalized students were represented in the fourth grade. The subjective experiences of Caucasians

taking standardized, high-stakes tests may differ from minority or other marginalized adjunct faculty groups.

A fourth, and final, limitation of this study was the brevity of the responses during the fourth-graders' interviews. This researcher knew that fourth-grade students, who were ten-years-old, might present a challenge because "children aged 4–11 years are the most challenging because of the stage of their linguistic development" (Kortesluoma, Hentinen, & Nikkonen, 2003). To prime the fourth-graders to be able to talk in-depth about their experiences with high-stakes testing, the researcher incorporated a drawing protocol as well as a quick write protocol. While the drawing and the words/phrases associated with testing did provide an excellent jumping off point for the conversation, at times the fourth-graders were reluctant to expand on their answers. Ideally, the researcher preferred much more lengthy and robust responses. Admittedly, the researcher's nascent and limited interviewing skills may have been another factor in the limited responses of the children.

Delimitations. Whereas a limitation is outside the researcher's control, Price and Murnan (2013) explained a delimitation as a systematic biased condition intentionally introduced into the study design by the researcher. A primary delimitation of this study was the researcher chose to interview students toward the end of the school year soon after they had taken the TNReady assessment. The purpose of this delimitation was to try and ensure that the testing experience was fresh in the minds of the fourth-grade students. Unfortunately, the Tennessee Department of Education moved the testing window, which created

logistical challenges when the researcher had to reschedule with the school and the teacher of the fourth-grade classroom.

A second delimitation of the study was the researcher chose to interview only fourth-grade students regarding their experiences with taking standardized, high-stakes tests. While third- and fifth-grade students take the TNReady assessment and both grades are a part of the elementary school population, the researcher chose to only interview fourth-grade students because fourth graders are often curious about their world and their learning.

A third delimitation of the study dealt with the triangulation of the sources. Ideally, I would have triangulated the analysis of the data with a research colleague. However, due to deadlines that I wanted to meet with the university I chose not to. I do feel confident with the results found through the first two steps with open coding and the second step with NVivo. My dissertation chair and dissertation committee agreed with the processes completed using coding and NVivo.

Assumptions and Biases of the Study

The participants of this study were fourth-grade students who had experiences with taking standardized, high-stakes testing. The researcher assumed that all the fourth-grade students not only had experienced taking a high-stakes test but that they were willing to talk about their lived experience of test taking. Furthermore, the researcher assumed each student was able to articulate his or her test taking experiences and would respond to the phenomenological interview

honestly without embellishing or responding based on with the student thought the researcher wanted to hear.

Regarding a potential bias of the study, the researcher was a kindergarten teacher in a K-5 elementary school and witnessed children having physical reactions such as stomachaches, headaches, and uncontrollable crying before and during benchmark assessments. Thus, the researcher suspected that high-stakes testing can negatively affect elementary-aged children physically, emotionally, and academically just as the professional literature supports how high-stakes testing negatively affects high school and middle school students. The researcher addressed her bias by detailing in writing her own thoughts, experiences, and summaries of the literature to gain an explicit awareness of her perspective on high-stakes testing. With explicit knowledge of her own experiences, the researcher was less likely to ask leading questions or impose her beliefs about high-stakes testing while conducting interviews with participants. To further guard against bias, when the researcher analyzed the fourth-grade students' interviews, the researcher employed strategies such as peer reviewers to ensure accuracy.

Summary of Methodology

The goal of this chapter was to outline the qualitative phenomenological research method the researcher used to explore the experiences of fourth-grade students as they engaged in standardized, high-stakes assessments. The researcher identified procedures for data collection and analysis, which were consistent with the known research procedures for conducting a phenomenological study.

Chapter IV: Data Analysis

In this chapter, I have presented the findings of the five individual interviews I conducted with fourth-grade students. The purpose of this study was to describe the first-person experiences of these students when taking high-stakes tests using a phenomenological method involving dialogic interviews and hermeneutic interpretation. The central research question used for this study, and the question that began each interview was as follows: As you think about your experiences with taking high-stakes tests, such as the TNReady assessment, would you describe to me what stood out to you during those test taking experiences?

This researcher's analysis of data began while interviewing the fourth-grade participants by the researcher noting during the interviews words that stood out either because the participants emphasized a word or a certain word came up repeatedly. Next, the researcher listened to the recorded interviews several times to become familiar with their content. After the researcher transcribed each interview, she analyzed each interview and made notes on each transcribed line to establish initial themes, which is also known as open coding. Next, the researcher grouped words and phrases that made up the open codes into smaller categories, which is known as axial coding.

Next, the researcher uploaded the transcribed interviews into a qualitative data-focused software program called NVivo and each category the researcher determined during axial coding was made into a theme. The NVivo program associated a percentage with each common word or phrase used in the interviews.

This enabled each category to be get a numerical representation that allowed the researcher a better understanding of the importance placed on certain words or phrases. According to the analysis that the researcher conducted then confirmed using NVivo, three prominent themes emerged when the students talked about their experiences with high-stakes testing: emotions, culture of testing, and role of teacher.

Data Analysis

The theme of *emotions* was the most prevalent theme in the data analysis. For example, within the theme of *emotions*, the fourth-grade students spoke of experiencing feeling stress or being nervous. A second theme, *culture of testing*, focused on how the rules of conduct during a test stood out in the minds of the students. For instance, the fourth-grade students spoke of how they had to sit still and were allowed minimal water breaks. Furthermore, participants spoke often of time as being a significant to the culture of testing and reflected an important reality that the fourth-graders experienced as they engaged in high-stakes tests, especially when the fourth graders felt like they could run out of time before completing the high-stakes assessment. Finally, the third theme that surfaced, *role of teacher*, focused on how teachers affected the students while they were completing the tests. The students described the importance of the support the teachers gave them and as well as how the teacher could cause stress. The following sections offer an expanded explanation and support of each theme.

Emotions. The theme of emotions was the most dominant category throughout the data analysis. In one of the student drawings, which the researcher

used to prime the students for the interview, the Fantastic Gary drew a picture of a little boy at his desk with various food items next to him. The caption under the picture read, “I’m eating because hungry, and I am stress-eating.” Alex drew a picture of himself writing at his desk; the writing described the stress he felt when he thought he was going to run out of time to finish his essay. The girls’ drawings were interesting because both girls in the study used a rainbow to symbolize their emotions of being calm and enjoying the tests. Luna Love Girl even went on to draw a lightning bolt with an X over it to symbolize that she was not stressed.

During the interview, Luna Love Girl labeled the TNReady test as fun. When the researcher asked Luna a follow-up question regarding how she felt regarding how challenged she felt when taking the TNReady assessment, Luna Love Girl responded, “I felt confident while taking the test, and I felt more confident even though I didn’t know what type of questions were going to be on the test.” The researcher asked Luna Love Girl what factors contributed to her feeling confident, and she stated, “I felt like I have enough time to finish, and I never worried about not finishing the test.” The interview with the second girl, Rosie, mirrored that with Luna Love Girl in that Rosie reported that she did not allow stress to interfere with her completion of the test and that she felt confident throughout taking the TNReady assessment.

The drawing Rosie provided showed a little girl smiling next to a rainbow with the phrase, “Be calm, and keep calm.” Rosie’s caption beneath her picture included the words “excited to take the test” and “show what I know”; however, during the interview, Rosie stated that during the test that she “was a little

nervous." When the researcher followed up with the question, "Can you tell me more about being excited and nervous at the same time?" Rosie explained that she was really calm about the TNReady test and excited to show what she knew, but she was also "a little nervous with a little of bit fear, and it didn't take over." The researcher then asked Rosie how she had remained calm. Rosie replied, "[The fear] wasn't terrible, and it didn't take over, I just kept calm."

The first male that the researcher interviewed was The Coop Man, whose picture showed a boy at his desk thinking of things besides the test. The emotions that surfaced repeatedly throughout The Coop Man's interview was boredom and lack of interest in testing. The Coop Man stated, "I thought the whole thing was boring because I couldn't move or talk." The researcher then asked what was going through The Coop Man's mind while he was taking the test. He answered that he wanted "to go home and lay down and go to sleep."

The Fantastic Gary, the second male student this researcher interviewed, drew a picture of a student with food, and the caption indicated he was stress-eating. When the researcher asked Gary to describe his picture to explain the phrase "stress-eating," he answered, "The picture is me sitting at my desk doing the TCAP, and I'm stress-eating with my bag of chips that I have with me. I am nervous about the TCAP because I am afraid I [am] going to fail." The researcher asked a follow-up question: "Why are you afraid you are going to fail?" Gary answered, "I've done [a test like] this before; I still get nervous like there may be something that I have never heard before, and I just get nervous."

Finally, Alex's words fell into the category of emotions as he focused on his anxiety of completing the test in the allotted amount of time. Alex described his anxiety in relation to his writing skills: "I am not a very fast writer, so the first part when we had to do the essay stressed me about because I thought I couldn't write everything down." Alex added, "I thought I needed to write faster, but I didn't want to write where you could not know what I was saying; this stressed me out knowing that I couldn't say what I wanted to say." He also expressed fear of failing due to the people grading his test not knowing what he was saying: "I didn't want to get a bad grade on the test because it would hurt my score."

Culture of testing. This category dealt with factors that students associated with high-stakes testing, including the rules and procedures of testing, and the time constraint students associated with testing. If a child's drawing, writing portion, or interview referred to any protocol associated with testing, the researcher assigned the word/phrase to the *culture of testing* category. In the data analysis, this category was the second largest category represented. The biggest component of this section was the importance of time in relation to the testing experiences. The Coop Man drew a clock on the wall and himself sitting at his desk completing the test. When asked about time, The Fantastic Gary remarked, "I get nervous on questions I've never heard before because we don't have a chance to finish the lesson because of time, and I feel that might be on the test." The thought of running out of time affected Alex because he stated he was a slower writer. Regarding the essay part, he said, "When we had to do the essay part, I was stressed because I thought I couldn't write everything down in time."

The researcher asked Alex a follow-up question: “What was it like to feel like you couldn’t write everything down in time?” Alex responded: “I worried.”

Luna Love Girl had a different experience of time. Toward the beginning of the interview, Luna Love Girl stated, “I always felt like I had enough time.” Later in the interview, Luna spoke about reaching the five-minute mark and having a bit of work left, which caused her feel “rushed a little bit.” Luna, quickly clarified, though, by saying, “Other than [feeling rushed a little bit], no worries with time.” The time element always seemed to overlap with various emotions, mostly negative ones.

A second protocol the students reported as being a part of the testing culture centered on the rules concerning food and water, and the theme surfaced in three out of the five interviews. In the boys’ interviews, the emphasis on food and water played a very important role in their testing experience. The role of food and water was mentioned particularly by the coop man, the fantastic gary, and Luna love girl in a way that alluded to the absence of the ability to eat and take breaks, also caused the students a level of anxiety. When Luna Love Girl was talking about what stood out to her when she thought about taking the TNReady assessment, she stated, “The breaks in between; I think, at my last school, we had to have little breaks just for the snacks, but, during the test, we were not allowed to eat.” The issue of running out of time between breaks also came up in The Coop Man’s interview. He mentioned the that he liked that his teacher gave out candy and water, because the food made him feel more comfortable. The Coop Man added, “[The candy and water] helped me get through the test; if I didn’t

have water or something to eat, I would probably die." The Coop Man explained that at his old school, they did not have breaks to get water during high-stakes testing, and that made his testing experience worse.

For the Fantastic Gary's, eating during the TNReady assessment was a response to his stress. His drawing and writing portion mentioned the presence of a bag of chips because, as he described it, "I was nervous about the TCAP because I was afraid I was going to fail."

Role of Teacher. According to the experiences of the fourth-grade students, the role of a teacher can have a positive or negative effect on a student and his or her performance on a high-stakes test. Most of the students recalled the teacher's role as a positive one that helped them make it through the test. The coop man recalled that he would "get good candy because Mrs. Brown (a pseudonym) would hand out water and candy." The teacher took on the role of a motivational coach for some students during testing. The Fantastic Gary recalled an instance when a teacher gave him support before the test. The researcher asked if there was anything to add, and Fantastic Gary remembered, "I was freaking out about it, and then Mrs. Smith (a pseudonym) told me not to freak out and it made us calm down." The importance of teachers creating a calm environment, or a stressed environment was present in Rosie's interview, too. When the researcher asked Rosie about her past testing experiences and Rosie's mention of stress, the student replied:

> I would stress but I realized maybe I shouldn't be stressed because all the teachers [at Anderson Baker Academy] are like, "You don't need to be

stressed, and there's no point in being stressed." At my old school, they were like, "You have to get a good score, and we must be first in the state."

When the researcher followed up with Rosie and asked her what it was like for her when her teachers at her previous school had told her she had to get a good score and be the first in the state, Rosie stated, "It was really nerve-racking, and I didn't think I would be smart enough to do it, but I always came out with a good score."

Summary of Results

The students in the study identified a variety of factors that influenced their TNReady assessment experiences. The participants indicated in the study that many external factors affected their testing experience which influenced their internal feelings and emotions. Students in the studied identified three major themes or factors that affected negatively and positively their testing experiences. The major themes of the findings included (a) the various emotions experienced by students during testing, (b) various aspects of the culture of testing affected students, and (c) the role of teacher positively affected how students handled the stress of testing.

Participants identified various emotions they experienced while completing the TNReady assessment. The three sub-themes connected to emotions emerged from the data related to the experiences: (a) students experienced an amount of stress when taking the TNReady assessment,(b) students also experienced anxiety due to a fear of failing the assessment, and (c)

students experienced boredom due to a lack of interest while completing the test. All five students expressed some form of emotion whether it pertained to negative feelings or positive feelings which only happened with one student.

The data concerning the culture of testing held importance for the boys in the study. The sub-themes related to culture of testing: (a) snacks and water played a role in alleviating anxiety for students, (b) rules and procedures caused anxiety for students, and (c) the element of time caused anxiety for students. This category came in second of importance with three out of five students mentioning this category in relation to their experience.

The last category dealt with the role of the teacher and how they affected students' testing experience. The sub-themes found in this category focused on how teachers can help students alleviate anxiety in preparation for testing. The themes emerged show (a) teachers who support students during the test help alleviate students' anxiety, (b) teachers can negatively affect students when extreme importance is placed on the test, (c) teachers who play a role of a mentor help students perform better on the test.

Chapter V: Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite a substantial body of research regarding the effects of standardized testing on high school and middle school students, this researcher found a lack of qualitative research related to the experiences of elementary-aged students who took high-stakes standardized tests. The purpose of this research study was to describe the first-person experiences of fourth-grade students when taking high-stakes tests using a phenomenological method involving dialogic interviews and hermeneutic interpretation. The theoretical lens through which I, as the researcher, framed this study was of this study Campbell's Law (Durto & Selland, 2012), which states, "the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social- decision making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the easier it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it was intended to monitor" (Berliner & Nichols, 2007, p.26). Said otherwise, this researcher wanted to see if she could find any evidence of testing influencing/corrupting the educational experiences of the fourth-grade students interviewed during the study. In the following chapter, the researcher offers conclusions based on the synthesis of knowledge I gained throughout the study as well as the themes that emerged during the analysis (emotions, culture of testing, and role of teacher). Also, this researcher presents implications for practice as well as recommendations for future research.

Conclusions of the Study

When the researcher first began this study in 2017, the topic of high-stakes testing was a hot topic in education. A high stakes assessment is a tool used as a

method for making important educational decisions, including teacher evaluation and student promotion to the next grade level (Triplett & Barksdale, 2005). After studying extensive literature on high-stakes testing, as well as analyzing the content gathered through data collection, the researcher was able to draw conclusions on how fourth-grade students experience high-stakes state assessments as well as unexpectedly gain insight on how fourth-grade students experience teacher created assessments used in the classroom. Several aspects of what was found by the researcher supported findings by other researchers regarding how students experience test anxiety, which added support to the theory behind Campbell's Law. The researcher did find some interesting contradictions found in literature concerning how boys and girls experience anxiety in relation to high-stakes testing.

Conclusion #1: Fourth-grade students experience teacher-made tests and high-stakes tests differently. The first conclusion the researcher draws from this study is that the fourth-grade students the researcher interviewed for this project experienced teacher-made tests and high-stakes standardized tests differently. Although how fourth-grade students experienced teacher-made tests was not the focus of this research, all five of the students mentioned teacher-made tests during their interview. According to the fourth-grade students, they experienced less anxiety when it came to taking an assessment that their teachers created and used in the classroom as an evaluation tool. This conclusion aligns with Segool et al. (2013), who found elementary-aged students reported low anxiety in the classroom testing environment, while those same students

experienced more anxiety when taking a high-stakes standardized test. Two students (The Fantastic Gary and Luna Love Girl) claimed they experienced a small amount of anxiety when it came to any kind of assessment, but the amount of anxiety was less when it pertained to a classroom test created by the teacher. Three students (Rosie, Alex, and The Coop Man) stated they felt less anxiety when completing a teacher created test due to their ability to study for the test. The presence of anxiety was still present for most students, but they stated they could handle the type of teacher made assessment better than the TNReady assessment.

Conclusion #2: Fourth-grade girls experience less anxiety than fourth-grade boys when taking high-stakes tests. In terms of how fourth-graders experience test anxiety, the researcher discovered two interesting points in the data. The first finding dealt with how specific genders experience test anxiety. The literature on middle school and high school students concludes girls, on average, experience greater test anxiety on state assessments than do boys (Segool, et al., 2013). In this study, the two fourth-grade girls indicated they felt little to no anxiety when taking the TNReady assessment, while the boys reported that they did experience anxiety with taking the TNReady assessment.

During their interviews, both girls stated they were excited to show the teachers their knowledge of the material. An interesting point to note is that Rosie did not experience any anxiety while at Anderson Baker Academy, the private school at which the researcher conducted her study; however, Rosie did report

that she experienced anxiety last year when she attended a public school due to the emphasis her teacher placed on testing from the teachers and administration.

The male students in the current study reported they experienced anxiety when taking the assessments because they worried about not knowing the answers and not doing well grade wise on the test. This find contradicts most the literature regarding middle school and high school students that suggests girls experience more anxiety when completing state assessments. The three fourth-grade male students described things like feeling nervous, bored, and worried they were going to run out of time. The theme of *time* was prevalent throughout the boys' interviews as they experienced time as a constraint, which increased their anxiety levels while they completed their TNReady tests.

Conclusion #3: Teachers play an important role in reducing or eliminating anxiety in fourth-grade students when those students are taking high-stakes tests. XXXX out of the XXXX students who participated in this study reported that their teacher played an important role in helping them feel calmer (or more anxious) when taking high-stakes tests. As mentioned above, Rosie reported that the atmosphere that her teachers created at Anderson Baker Academy, where her teachers placed little to no emphasis on the end-of-year standardized tests, made all the difference in the world as far as the level of anxiety that she experienced. Specifically, Rosie's public-school teacher emphasized the importance of getting a good score so that the public school could be among the best in the state, Rosie stated that the experience of testing was

"really nerve-racking," and she thought she would not be smart enough to achieve the teacher's desired outcome.

The fourth-grade boys also discussed the importance of the role of the teacher in calming their anxiety. Two of the male students (The Fantastic Gary and The Coop Man) commented on the significance of their teacher reassuring them of their ability and providing them comfort items like snacks and drinks to calm them down and help them complete the TNReady state assessment. The mention of food and water in three out of five student interviews showed the importance placed on comfort in the form of a snack. When teachers allowed food or water during the test, the experience of high-stakes testing was more positive and less stressful.

Implications for Practice

The data collected for this phenomenological study provides evidence for the following implications for practice regarding how fourth-grade students experience high-stakes testing:

- To help elementary students deal with anxiety during high-stakes testing, teachers should take on the role of a coach, mentor, and cheerleader for their students.
- Administrators, teachers, and caregivers should become more transparent in how they deal with high-stakes testing and young children to become more aware of how high-stakes tests affects elementary-aged students.

- Administrators should provide more professional development and training for teachers in how high-stakes testing may affect elementary-aged children and what to do to minimalize the negative effects of high-stakes testing.

Implication #1: To help elementary students deal with anxiety during high-stakes testing, teachers should take on the role of a coach, mentor, and cheerleader for their students. Students stated they experienced less anxiety when teachers provided a relaxed testing atmosphere and when teachers did not emphasize the student's performance on the high-stakes assessment. This implication is supported by the much older study conducted by Hill and Wigfield (1984) that reported elementary children experienced less anxiety when their teachers reduced the importance placed on the test. To help students deal with anxiety during testing the researcher recommends teachers take on the role of a coach, mentor, and cheerleader for their students. This would help calm students' fears when it came time to take the test. Teachers could also serve as a role as counselor and talk openly with their students regarding their thoughts and feelings regarding testing to help alleviate any anxiety the students may feel.

Implication #2: Administrators, teachers, and caregivers should become more transparent in how they deal with high-stakes testing and young children to become more aware of how high-stakes tests affects elementary-aged students. As mentioned in Chapter III under *Limitations*, this researcher approached eight different schools/school districts to request access to interview elementary students regarding their experiences of taking high-stakes tests. The public

schools expressed distrust of an outside researcher talking to their young students; however, enough literature is beginning to emerge to suggest that high-stakes testing may have adverse psychological effects on students. This researcher recommends that administrators, teachers, and caregivers become more transparent and open to discussing high-stakes tests and elementary-aged students, which begins with speaking directly with the children regarding how they experience testing.

The lack of research related to elementary-aged students and high stakes testing allows for the uncontested proliferation of less-than-ideal teaching practices to prepare the elementary-aged students are prepared for the high-stakes tests. These uninformed practices that are not aligned with research demonstrates the theory of Campbell's Law that asserts when there are high-stakes associated to an indicator such as a test score, you have a corrupted process that can render the assessment meaningless (Nicholas & Berliner, 2008, p.26). Many reports in the literature claim this form of corruption takes place in replacing higher order thinking skills with basic knowledge and skill drills which is resulting in loss instructional time in order to teach to the test (Triplett & Barksdale, 2005).

Furthermore, there exists a scant amount of literature concerning how younger students experience high-stakes testing, although elementary-aged students take as many or more high-stakes tests as do their middle school and high school counterparts. The researcher strongly believes there needs to be more research completed on how these elementary-aged students feel while taking a high-stakes assessment. The literature on how parents, teachers, and school

officials feel about testing is largely represented. The presence of high stakes testing is present in the school and seems to be increasing, and it is only fair that we understand the effects of repeated testing on our students (Fleege et al., 1992).

Implication #3: Administrators should provide more professional development and training for teachers in how high-stakes testing may affect elementary-aged children and what to do to minimalize the negative effects of high-stakes testing. As discussed above, adults need to become more aware of how high-stakes testing affects elementary-aged students. As researchers continue to clarify the experiences of elementary-aged children and further identify the negative effects that high-stakes testing can have on elementary-aged children, administrators need to use this information to prepare teachers on how to deal with high-stakes testing in elementary schools. As made clear by the participants of this current study, teachers are in the position to maximize or minimize the negative experiences that elementary-aged students experience while taking high-stakes tests.

Putting into practice the implications for practice. Principals and teachers at the building level of any school system can implement each of the implications for practice mentioned above. While this researcher doubts that little will change regarding to how state-level administrators and district-level administrators view and implement high-stakes testing in elementary schools, building-level administrators and teachers have the autonomy to allow for how they prepare for and present high-stakes tests. Certainly, a school district's close proximity to a university with a highly-regarded teacher training program could

provide access to the latest research on the effects of high-stakes testing on elementary-aged children as well as provide professional development opportunities and training for teachers.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendation #1. Based on the difficulty this researcher had gaining access to elementary-aged school children in public schools to discuss those children's experiences with high-stakes testing, this researcher believes that more researchers should investigate adults' perceptions of children in elementary schools participating in research. Specifically, what do adults think (how do those adults feel) about elementary-aged students talking about their experiences of taking high-stakes tests. As mentioned in Chapters III and V, this study was nearly impossible to conduct due to the hurtles of obtaining permission from all individuals needed to participate in this type of study. Why did this researcher encounter so much resistant from six public school systems? Is this resistance to allowing children to talk to a researcher about testing experience common across the nation, or did this researcher have an exceptional experience with obtaining access to elementary-aged children?

Recommendation #2. The second recommendation for future research this researcher puts forth is to (a.) expand the number of elementary-aged students in future studies, (b.) include more grade levels, (c.) include more children from diverse backgrounds, and (d.) discover more effective ways to talk to students about their experiences. As the researcher stated under the *Limitations and Delimitations* (Chapter III) of this study, the greatest limitation of the research

was that the researcher was able to interview only five participants. Although the researcher engaged in a qualitative study, most interview protocols suggest no fewer than eight or ten participants in order to achieve saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Furthermore, the researcher chose to only interview fourth-grade students thinking that she would have plenty of participants in the public schools she approached. In the state where this study took place, elementary schools begin administering the state's standardized test at the end of third grade and continues through fifth grade as most elementary schools are organized as K-5 schools. When the researcher made the choice to approach private schools, which are much smaller, the researchers' sample was severely limited.

Next, future researchers should investigate the testing experiences of a more diverse elementary student body population. A sample that consists of racial and ethnics subgroups such as African American and Hispanics, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency would provide researchers a larger picture of how elementary-aged students experience high-stakes testing in a school district.

Finally, as future researchers talk to a greater number and a more diverse range of elementary students about their experiences of high-stakes testing, future researchers should also seek more effective ways to get elementary students to talk about their experiences. The brevity of the interviews caught this researcher by surprise, and the researcher believed that the children's responses could have been much more robust. Perhaps if the researcher spent more time getting to know

the children before the interviews, this could have positively affected the robustness of the responses. Bottom line: Much literature exists that involves young children as participants; however, many of these past students involves research on or about children rather than focusing on research conducted with children (Kortesluoma et al., 2003). Future researchers must figure out better ways to illicit information from elementary-aged children.

Concluding Summary

This researcher believes that it is imperative that more researchers continue to investigate elementary-aged students' experiences related to high-stakes testing. It is the desire of the researcher that what was found during this study will: (a) give students a voice on how they are affected by testing which will help school personal and teachers respond in a way that will alleviate students' anxiety,(b) influence further studies on the topic of test anxiety and how elementary aged students experience anxiety, and (c) cultivate a school culture where teachers can eliminate teaching practices that harm students' learning in order to prepare for a test. The researcher selected the topic of test anxiety because of the relevance of testing in education, and how the over testing of our students led to negative effects such as: anxiety, nervousness, and losing the love of learning all which have an impact on students' physical health, mental health, and their academic performance.

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Appendix A

Letter from LMU's IRB Granting Approval to Conduct Study

LMU | Lincoln Memorial University
HARROGATE, TENNESSEE

Office of Research, Grants, and Sponsored Programs
Grant-Lee Hall, Suite 104

Federal-Wide Assurance Number FWA00012543
Institutional Organization Research Group (IORG) IORG0005225
OHRP and Biomedical Social Science IRB IRB00006284

April 17, 2019

Marcinda Asburry
7837 Chillingsworth Lane
Knoxville, TN 37938

Dear Ms. Asburry,

On **April 16, 2019,** the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **approved** your proposal titled **"High-Stakes Testing and Test Anxiety in Elementary-Aged Students"** as **Full** review (IRB# 793 V.1) with revisions. Those revisions have been received and reviewed by the IRB on April 17, 2019.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval by a request to amend a currently-approved protocol form.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at Lincoln Memorial University and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 423-869-6834.

Sincerely,

Kay Paris

Dr. Kay Paris, Chair
LMU Institutional Review Board

CC: Dr. Shannon Collins

Items review:
IRB Application V.1
Child Assent Form
Parental Consent Letter
JFWA permission letters
Picture sheet

Appendix B

Copy of Permission from Principal

[redacted]
Interim Principal [redacted]
6965 Cumberland Gap Pkwy.
Harrogate, TN 37725

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

[redacted],

My name is Marcinda Asburry, a doctoral candidate at Lincoln Memorial University. I am excited to write to you to request your permission to conduct a research study in your district as part of my dissertation. The title of the study is "High-Stakes Testing and Test Anxiety in Elementary-Aged Students."

I'm seeking your permission to approach the fourth-grade teachers from [redacted] for entry into their classrooms. Within the fourth and fifth grade classroom. I will seek consent from each student's family for the student to participate in my study. Once the families return their "consent to participate" letters to the teachers, I will collect the letters and work with only the children for whom I have permission. I am enclosing a copy of the parental consent letter for your review.

During the actual study, I will ask eligible students to draw a picture describing their feelings after they complete the TN Ready state assessment. I am attaching a copy of the questionnaire that contains the questions that I will ask the students as they draw. Again, for your review, I am attaching the questionnaire.

Pending your approval, the fourth-grade students who participate in this research will complete the activity in a classroom during the school day with their classroom teacher and with me, the researcher. I will conduct this research in May after standardized testing is completed and will not interfere with any instruction or test preparation. The survey process should take no longer than 45 minutes. To ensure ALL individuals connected to my study remain anonymous and confidential, I will pool the survey results for my dissertation. Should I publish this study, again, I will document only the pooled results.

[redacted], I greatly appreciate your consideration in approving this research. I am happy to answer any questions or concerns that you may have at any time. Simply contact me by using either the number or email address I listed at the top of this letter.

If you agree to approve my request, kindly sign below and return the signed form in the enclosed self-addressed envelope.

Sincerely,
Marcinda Asburry
Lincoln Memorial University Doctoral Candidate.

Approved by:_____

Appendix C

Copy of Permission from Teacher

Mrs [redacted]
Instructor, [redacted]
[redacted]

Dear [redacted],

My name is Marcinda Asburry, a doctoral candidate at Lincoln Memorial University. I am excited to write to you in order to request your permission to conduct a research study in your district as part of my dissertation. The title of the study is "High-Stakes Testing and Test Anxiety in Elementary- Aged Students."

I'm seeking your permission to conduct research in your classroom. I will seek consent from each student's family for the student to participate in my study. Once the families return their "consent to participate" letters to the teachers, I will collect the letters and work with only the children for whom I have permission. I am enclosing a copy of the parental consent letter for your review.

During the actual study, I will ask eligible students to draw a picture describing their feelings after they complete the TN Ready state assessment. Students will have 25 minutes to complete the drawing portion and 20 minutes to complete the writing portion. The researcher will then interview students individually regarding their drawings. The interview portion should take two-days to complete. The interview will be audio- recorded by the researcher using a handheld recorder. I am attaching a copy of the questionnaire that contains the questions that I will ask the students after they complete their drawing. Again, for your review, I am attaching the questionnaire.

Pending your approval, the fourth-grade students who participate in this research will complete the activity in a classroom during the school day with their classroom teacher and with me, the researcher. I will conduct this research two days after standardized testing is completed and will not interfere with any instruction or test preparation. The survey process should take 45 minutes. In order to ensure ALL individuals connected to my study remain anonymous and confidential, I will only use results of students who obtained permission to participate in the study for my dissertation. Should I publish this study, again, I will document only the results of students who obtained permission to participate in the study.

[redacted], I greatly appreciate your consideration in approving this research. I am happy to answer any questions or concerns that you may have at any time. Simply contact me by using either the number or email address I listed at the top of this letter.

If you agree to approve my request, kindly sign below and return the signed form to me via my LMU email.

Sincerely,

Marcinda Asburry
Lincoln Memorial University Doctoral Candidate.

Appendix D

Copy of Consent Form Sent to Parents

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study in your son/daughter's classroom. I am currently enrolled in the doctoral program at Lincoln Memorial University and in the process of writing my dissertation. The study is entitled High-Stakes Testing and Test Anxiety in Elementary-aged Students.

I hope that you will allow your child to participate in my study. The students in the fourth-grade class will be asked to draw a picture describing their feelings while completing the TN Ready state assessment. This study will have no impact on your child's grades or test scores. A copy of the questionnaire students will use is included. Due to the nature of this study, I will need permission from parents of students who wish to participate in the study. If you allow your child to participate, please sign this letter and return it to your child's classroom teacher.

If approval is granted, student participants will complete the activity in a classroom during the school day with the classroom teacher and the researcher. This study will be conducted in May after standardized testing is completed and should not interfere with instruction and test prep. The survey process should take no longer than 45 minutes. The survey results will be pooled for my dissertation and individuals will remain absolutely confidential and anonymous. Should this study be published, only the pooled results will be documented. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and your child has the option not to participate.

Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. I am happy to answer any questions or concerns that you may have at any time. You may contact me at marcinda.asburry@lmunet.edu if you have any questions.

Thank you for your consideration,

Marcinda Asburry
Lincoln Memorial University Doctoral Student

Child's Name: _____

This will only inform me of who can participate in the study. The actual results will be anonymous and I will be the only one who sees the results.

_____ Yes, my child may participate in this voluntary study

_____ No, I do not wish for my child to participate in this study at this time

Parent's Signature_____

Appendix E

Copy of Assent Form Sent to Fourth-Grade Students

Dear Student,

I am doing a study to learn about how kids experience high-stakes testing. I am asking you to help, because we don't know very much about how kids your age experience test anxiety.

If you agree to be in my study, I will ask you to draw a picture to show you feel while you are taking a standardized test. After the test, I will interview you to talk about how you feel while are you taking a standardized test. The interview will be recorded using a handheld recorder. The only person that will have access to the recording will be the researcher.

You can ask questions at any time during the activity. If you decide not to finish, you may stop at any time. There is no right or wrong answer because this is not a test.

If you sign this form, then that means you have read this form and agree to participate in the study. If you don't want to be in the study, then please do not sign this form.

Thank you,
Marcinda Asburry

Signature _____ Date _____

Printed Name _____ Date _____

Appendix F

Example of Drawing/Writing Protocol and Transcribed Interview

Rosie Pone

Please Draw a picture in the square showing what you thought, how you felt, or what you experienced while taking the TNReady Assessment

Now please describe your drawing: Please feel free to use the back if you need more space. 😊

I was really calm and exited to show what i knew. But I was a little nerveous But it was all good i actually had a lot of fun.

Interesting to say calm & nervous but test was fun?

Interview: Rosie

Interviewer: Tell me how you feel when you are taking a test in the classroom?

Rosie: Tests don't really bother me. I am calm when it comes to test

Interviewer: That's interesting. Tell me more about when you are calm?

Rosie: I just feel like I am prepared for the test

Interviewer: Do you study for tests?

Rosie: Yes, I do.

Interviewer: Can you please tell me about your picture?

Rosie: So, I was really calm about it, and I was excited to show what I knew, but I did have a little bit of fear, but it wasn't terrible and it didn't take over. I just kept calm and I actually had some moments where I would start laughing because I was so calm. I laugh when I get calm sometimes. I drew me sitting on a cloud because I was so calm, and it was like I was in the sky.

Interviewer: What made you so calm?

Rosie: I have taken this test before and I was stressed, and I've always gotten a good score and I was like well maybe I could change it up and not be so stressed and see if I still got a good score. I hope I did but I won't know probably until a while.

Interviewer: So, in the past you would get stressed is that correct?

Rosie: Yes, but I realized maybe I shouldn't be stressed because all these teachers are like "you don't need to be stressed" and "there's no point in being stressed."

At my old school they were like “you have to get a good score” and “we have to be the first in the state”

Interviewer: So, when they said that you had to get a good score and you had to be the first in the state. How did that make you feel?

Rosie: It was really nerve racking, and I didn’t think I would be smart enough to do it but I actually came out with a good score.

Interviewer: Did the teachers telling you that you had to do good affect you?

Rosie: I don’t know, all I did was try and believe in myself because in the past I did so well I thought I could just change my mood. I’m not changing my intelligence; I’m just changing my mood.

Interviewer: So, you’re saying changing your mood really helped you?

Rosie: Yes, because I was so much calmer, and I actually had a lot of fun.

Interviewer: What made it so fun?

Rosie: It was nice to show the state that I have the brains to do something like that and the intelligence to do something like that.

Interviewer: Would you like to say anything else about your testing experience?

Rosie: No not really

Interviewer: Thank you for your time.