SUBURBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS' SENSEMAKING OF TESTING REQUIREMENTS: A CASE STUDY OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF STATE POLICY AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL

by

KIMBERLY ELIZABETH WEST

(Under the Direction of Sheneka Williams)

ABSTRACT

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2015 as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) reduced the amount of high-stakes testing administered to students. Under the ESSA, each state crafted a unique plan. Development of Georgia's ESSA Plan began in 2017 and received federal approval in 2018. Implementation of the plan began during the 2018-19 school year. The literature shows that under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), instructional practices were affected, including the reduction of course offerings in favor of more focused test preparation. Would there be a shift in the way teachers planned instruction given the changes in testing? This holistic single-case study aimed to investigate how suburban middle grades teachers' instructional practice was affected by the testing requirements specified in Georgia's ESSA Plan. Additionally, the study investigated how school leaders supported teachers as they implemented the plan. Stanton Middle School (SMS), a suburban Georgia Title I school, was chosen as the site for the study because of its continued academic improvement over time and the opportunity to examine a suburban Title I middle school in the context of instructional practice. Eleven teachers and two school leaders participated in interviews about their knowledge of Georgia's ESSA Plan, how testing impacts instructional practice, and the

support provided by school leaders as teachers implemented the plan. Three themes emerged from the within-case analysis of the data. Those themes were: (1) practice over policy, (2) testing drives teachers' instructional practice, and (3) expectations from the district take precedence over expectations from the state. Findings from the data showed that district-level testing affected teachers' instructional practice more than state-level testing required by Georgia's ESSA Plan. The strong district focus of the school under study made it difficult to clearly see and understand if the testing requirements specified in Georgia's ESSA Plan had any bearing on teachers' instructional practice. Moreover, SMS teachers and school leaders lacked an understanding of the plan as a policy. The study recommends that school leaders engage in policy-based conversations that affect instructional practice. Further research must be conducted to understand how ESSA affects instructional practice.

INDEX WORDS: Every Student Succeeds Act, Sensemaking, Instructional Practice, High-Stakes Testing, Suburban Title I Schools

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2020

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Joy Sterling. She has always pushed me to be my best and had complete faith in me. My mother knew that I would become a doctor, just not the kind with a Ph.D. I also dedicate this dissertation to my son, Bryan. This work was not just for me, but also for you. I love you and know that you too will do great things.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Dr. Sheneka Williams, thank you for serving as my committee chair and guiding me through this process. You stepped in and helped me to realize that completing my doctoral degree was possible. Also, thank for you answering my texts and phone calls during those times when I almost gave in to impostor syndrome. Your patience and understand are immensely appreciated.

To Dr. Elizabeth Debray, I've learned so much from you about education policy during the course of my program. You have helped me to not only understand education policy from a historical perspective, but also how it shapes the work of educators today. Thank you for serving on my committee.

To Dr. Kristen Bub, thank you for serving as the methodologist on my committee. The knowledge you have imparted to me about research methodologies through class has been beneficial to my ability to complete my dissertation. You helped me to better understand the various methodologies, especially quantitative ones.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The introduction of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) into schools and classrooms across the country left varying effects on the instructional practices of teachers. From reduced instructional time in subjects such as social studies (Hill-Anderson, Harrison, & Tardino, 2012), to the narrowing of the curriculum in favor of more focused test preparation (Dee, Jacob, Hoxby, & Ladd, 2010; Powell, Higgins, Aram, & Freed, 2009), the impact of NCLB on the classroom has been consequential. Considering the promises of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), NCLB's successor, one has to question how the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Elementary Act (ESEA) will, if at all, affect the instructional practices of teachers. With the reduction in testing requirements and the decrease in the frequency of state-level content-based end-of-grade (EOG) assessments, particularly in the middle grades, the question of how the ESSA affects teachers' instructional practice must be explored.

Statement of the Problem

The signing of the ESSA by President Barack Obama in 2015 reigned in the expanded role of federal education policy ushered in by its predecessor—NCLB (Saultz, Fusarelli, & McEachrin, 2017). Promising reduced federal oversight, more rigorous academic standards, improved support for special populations (e.g., students with disabilities and economically disadvantaged students), and fewer high-stakes assessments, the ESSA put the power to reform public education back in the hands of state and local stakeholders. Requiring each state to craft its own plan, the ESSA aims to address the unique needs of students.

For Georgia, State School Superintendent Richard Woods viewed the ESSA as a means to have "flexibility with accountability" (Lewis, 2016). As outlined by the U.S. Department of

Education (USDOE), the state's approved plan emphasized improved student learning and outcomes, the education of the whole child, a revised accountability system, and support and assistance for low-performing schools. Georgia's state plan was originally approved in 2017. The USDOE's suggested changes to the state's plan were approved in early 2018. Implementation of major components of Georgia's ESSA plan began during the 2018-2019 school year.

Under NCLB, Georgia middle school students in grades six through eight completed annual state-level Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) in the content areas of math, reading/English language arts, science, and social studies; the CRCT were summative assessments of student learning based on the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS; GADOE, 2014). Scores from the math and reading/English language arts CRCT were used to grade schools as a component of the adequate yearly progress (AYP) provision of NCLB. Scores for science and social studies were also reported but were not included as a measurement of AYP. With the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) in the form of the ESSA, the power to determine Georgia's annual state-level assessments has been returned to the state. The CRCT was eliminated at the end of the 2013-2014 school year. State-level annual EOG summative assessments at the middle school level have been scaled-back. As detailed in Georgia's ESSA plan, some testing remnants of NCLB remain (e.g., testing students in grades three through eight annually in reading/English language arts and math; GADOE, 2018). However, middle school students in 6th and 7th grades are no longer required to be tested annually in science and social studies. Instead, students are tested once during middle school, in the 8th grade. Instead of mandated state testing in science, social studies, and elective courses (e.g., music and technology), local school districts can still develop and administer standards-based assessments to evaluate student performance and use for instructional planning. Some

districts, such as those participating in the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA) under the ESSA—such as the Georgia MAP and Putnam Consortium's Navvy—will administer alternate assessments and the state's annual Georgia Milestones Assessments. It will be determined at the conclusion of the 2023-2024 school if the alternate assessments should be administered statewide (Dalton, 2019a).

While testing has been reduced, it still has the potential to affect teachers' instructional practice. Particularly considering the effect testing requirements under NCLB had on teachers' instructional practice. Considering this change in education policy, the question is how will teachers' instructional practice be impacted as a result of the testing requirements specified in Georgia's ESSA plan? For example, is the instructional planning of teachers in non-tested content areas (e.g., 6th and 7th grade science) emphasized as heavily for teachers in tested content areas (e.g., 6th, 7th, and 8th grade English language arts and math). Is there a shift in the way teachers prepare for instruction given the importance placed on state-level testing? This is important to consider not only in regard to testing, but also to changes to the state's accountability system and how it evaluates and remediates underperforming schools.

Study Purpose

The purpose of my study sought to fill a gap in the literature by addressing the dynamics between education policy and teachers' instructional practice. In essence, how are teachers' instructional practices affected by education policies—specifically Georgia's ESSA Plan. I investigated this by interviewing math, English language arts (ELA), science, and social studies teachers in grades 6-8 about their instructional practices, how state-level EOG and end-of-course (EOC) assessments influenced their instructional practice, as well as the support (e.g., instructional resources, professional development) provided by school leaders as they plan and

prepare instruction using state created standards that align with the EOGs and EOCs. School leaders were also interviewed, providing their perspective of how they provided instructional support to their teachers.

One of the components of the ESSA that directly impact teachers' instructional practice is annual state-level EOG and EOC assessments as a part of the Georgia Milestones Assessment System (GMAS). In conducting my study, I sought to understand how teachers planned their instruction regardless if their students were assessed under the GMAS.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided the investigation of the effect of education policy — specifically the Georgia ESSA Plan—on teachers' sensemaking as demonstrated by their instructional practice are:

1) How do suburban Georgia middle grades teachers' sensemaking of the Georgia Every Student Succeeds Act Plan end-of-grade assessment requirements affect their instructional practice?
2) How do suburban Georgia middle grades school leaders support teachers' instructional practice as they implement annual assessment requirements under the Georgia Every Student Succeeds Act Plan?

Theoretical Framework

The study was grounded in Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer's (2002a) cognitive, sense-making framework. Teachers, whether they are aware of it or not, play a significant role in the execution of education policy. Darling-Hammond (1990), contended that education policy is improved when teachers are involved in the process. However, this is often not the case as teachers are viewed primarily as implementers who "interpret the thin guidance they've received,

they fill the gaps in their understanding of the policy with what is already familiar to them, creating [a] 'mélange' of practices" (Darling-Hammond, 1990, p. 342). How teachers make sense of policy is important in determining whether the policy will be implemented as intended by policymakers. Policy implementation does not simply mean putting a set of directives into action. Instead, agents of implementation must understand or make sense of the policy before they can put it into action. Spillane et al. (2002a) developed a cognitive, sense-making framework that explicates how teachers, as agents of education policy implementation, understand policy in three contexts. Those contexts are: 1) individual cognition (how teachers make sense of policy based upon their prior knowledge, experiences, beliefs); 2) situated cognition (how teachers interpret policy based upon the situation or context); and 3) policy signals (how those external to teachers (e.g., school leaders) make sense of policy and its implementation, as well as how they communicate those messages). The sense-making framework, as maintained by Spillane et al.:

> is designed to underscore the need to take account of, and to unpack implementing agents' sense-making from about the policy. Moving beyond a purely behavioral focus on what implementing agents do, we articulate a model for how they construct understandings of the policy message, construct an interpretation of their own practice light of the message, and draw conclusions about potential changes in their practice as a result. (p. 392)

Thus, the multi-dimensional dynamics of policy implementation pose challenges to the process. This especially true when issues such as teachers' prior knowledge and experiences influence policy implementation in such a way as the new policy is understood to be something they already know and practice. Or, when the situation (e.g., school) in which the policy is being

implemented is hindered due to teachers working in isolation or a lack of cohesiveness amongst the group.

Methodology

A holistic single-case study design was used to conduct the study (Yin, 2014). The decision to employ a case study design was based on the structure and focus of the study research questions. Yin (2014) maintained that case study methodology was most appropriate when the proposed research questions ask "how" and "why" or are explanatory in nature. Furthermore, case study research allows various types of evidence or data collection tools to be used and incorporated into the study. The types of data that can be used in a case study include documents, interviews, observations, and other sources of data. Overall, a case study design is a form of empirical inquiry, that utilizes multiple data collection sources for triangulation, and is applicable to varying epistemological perspectives (Yin, 2014).

Interviews of teachers and school leaders were the primary data collection tools used. Stanton Middle School (SMS), a suburban Title I middle school, was the case or focus of the study. Eleven SMS teachers were interviewed about their knowledge of Georgia's ESSA Plan, testing under the GMAS, how the GMAS end-of-grade assessments and district-level testing requirements affected their instructional practice, and the support provided by school leaders as they made sense of and implemented testing requirements as specified in Georgia's ESSA Plan. Two school leaders, the principal and an assistant principal, were also interviewed, evaluating their knowledge of the Georgia ESSA Plan, how the plan was being implemented in the school, and administrative support given to teachers as they made sense of and implemented the Georgia ESSA Plan in their classrooms. A within-case strategy was used to analyze the data. Using a within-case approach, the data in the case was interpreted and integrated across the entire case

(Miles et al., 2014). Interview data was analyzed and coded for the development of themes (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Miles et al., 2014).

Stanton Middle School (SMS), a suburban Title I middle school located in a Georgia suburb outside of a large urban city, was the focus of the study. The school was one of several middle schools in the Williams County Schools district and was selected for the study as a representation of middle schools in the district. The decision to choose SMS as a research site was also due its context as a suburban school. A review of the literature shows that schools within this context are primarily researched due to race and resegregation issues, not academic achievement and high-stakes testing (Rotberg, 2020; Jones, 2018; Frankenberg, 2012). Moreover, the school was chosen due to its increases in student achievement as measured by Georgia's College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI) score reports overtime. The student achievement at SMS was contrary to the depiction of suburban Title I schools in the literature that suggested that suburban Title I schools were perceived to be underperforming (Wiley, Shircliffe, & Morley, 2012).

Significance of the Study

Various local, state, and federal education policies shape and inform the practice of teachers. How teachers make sense of those policies affects how they are implemented as well as the effectiveness of the implementation. This study was significant because it brings attention to how teachers understand high-stakes testing policy and how it is implemented as demonstrated by their instructional practice. The implementation of the ESSA scaled back testing requirements enacted under NCLB. While the reduction of testing is lauded by various education stakeholders, it was important to examine how teachers' instructional practice was affected by these changes. More specifically, how was Georgia teachers' instructional practice affected as they made sense

of annual testing requirements specified in the Georgia ESSA plan. Did teachers continue to feel the pressures of high-stakes testing resulting in instructional practices that narrowed the curriculum and focused on test preparation? Or, how if at all were the instructional practices of academic content teachers (e.g., 6th and 7th grade science and social studies teachers) whose students were not required to take a state-mandated assessment at the end of the school year affected? Moreover, what support is given to teachers by school leaders in the sensemaking process? How teachers make sense of policy is not only important to know for implementation purposes, but is also important for those who craft policy to understand if the goal is to effectively implement policies resulting in student success and positive change. Moreover, this study was important because scores from the EOG and EOC assessments under the GMAS are used to evaluate schools as a components of a school's CCRPI score; Georgia's accountability system that evaluates the effectiveness of schools.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Upon signing the reauthorized ESEA in December 2015, President Barack Obama regarded the passage of the ESSA as "an early Christmas present" (Resmovits, 2015). After years of attempting to remedy NCLB through waivers, a competitive Race to Top grant fund, and bipartisan wrangling in Congress, the reauthorized version of the ESEA had now become the country's newest federal education law. With the ESSA came the promise of a reduced federal role in education giving states more power over educational decisions (Heise, 2017; Saultz, Fusarelli, & McEachrin, 2017). Moreover, the enactment of the ESSA refocused public education, bringing to light areas overlooked by NCLB such as rural education and the need to provide students with a more well-rounded, student-focused education. Under the guidance of the USDOE, the onus was on individual states to develop and implement a plan that would provide students with access to a high-quality, equitable education thus closing the achievement gap.

While there were many changes under the ESSA some components of NCLB have carried over. One such remnant is testing as part of states' accountability system. The high-stakes testing under NCLB not only provided federal, state, and local stakeholders with insight into the academic achievement of students in the content areas of math and reading/English language arts, but it also altered the instructional practices of teachers and changed school curriculums (Faulkerner & Cook, 2006; Greene et al., 2008; Musoleno & White, 2008). While high-stakes testing is still a requirement under the ESSA, it has been scaled back. For middle school students in Georgia, that means they will not be assessed in science and social studies at the end of sixth and seventh grade. Given this change, it is important to understand how teachers of these content

areas instructional practices may change, if at all, knowing their students will not be tested by the state. Thus, how will teachers make sense of the ESSA and implement it through their instructional practice? Spillane et al.'s (2002a) cognitive framework for policy implementation is the theoretical lens through which this study is framed.

The chapter begins with a brief history of high-stakes testing in public K-12 schools in the United States. Next, I discuss the impact of testing on instructional practice. How high-stakes testing under NCLB affected instruction is discussed next, including the effects on middle grades and non-tested content areas. The review of the literature shifts to changes to federal education policy from the transition from NCLB to the ESSA. Suburban schools, the setting where the case study is located are discussed. Lastly, the theoretical framework is explicated.

A Brief History of High-Stakes Testing in American Public K-12 Schools

> Our Nation is at risk…the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threaten our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1984, p. 5)

Statements from the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report, such as the one previously quoted, propelled the country into action. Concerned about the state of public K-12 and higher education and growing global competition—both educationally and economically—the report painted a bleak picture of the state of education in America. Removed from post-Sputnik progress, the country's leaders in education and business felt pressure to make change. One of the recommendations from the report highlighted the need for more standardized assessments. The recommendation stated:

> Standardized tests of achievement (not to be confused with aptitude tests) should be administered at major transition points from one level of schooling to another and particularly from high school to college or work. The purposes of these tests would be to: (a) certify the student's credentials; (b) identify the need for remedial interventions; and (c) identify the opportunity for advanced or accelerated work. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1984, p. 74)

Moreover, these tests should not be administered federally, but rather under the control of state and local school districts. Vogler and Virtue (2007) contended that the *A Nation at Risk* report was the catalyst for the use of high-stakes testing. Furthermore, it could also be argued that the recommendations from the report influenced the major tenants of NCLB, such as the use and development of academic content standards (Lefowits & Miller, 2006; Vogler & Virtue, 2007) and teacher quality and certification.

While the findings from the *A Nation at Risk* report further opened the door for the use of high-stakes testing in public schools, the use of such tests is not new. Tests such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), the Stanford Achievement Test, and college entrance exams, such as the SAT and ACT have been administered to students primarily for the purpose of providing information (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Rarely, as maintained by Nichols and Berliner (2007) were the results of these tests used to deny students access to opportunities. What is new is the consequential use of high-stakes testing and its impact on students and teachers. For example, the denial of grade promotion or graduation from high school. In their brief history of high-stakes testing, Nichols and Berliner (2007) explicated caution expressed by educational leaders about the use of high-stakes testing as early as the late 1880s. Hence, discussion around the narrowing of curriculum and test-results to determine teachers' pay in the NCLB-era was not novel. These

issues had long been debated as a means to improve public education. The implementation of NCLB spread the use of high-stakes testing bringing it to the forefront codifying its consequences and "paving the way for an educational crisis that threatens to leave our nation behind" (Nichols & Berliner, 2007, p. 7). A move that is counter to the hopes of improving public K-12 education as exposed in the *A Nation at Risk* report.

Impact of Testing on Instructional Practice

For teachers, the use of high-stakes testing yielded mixed results. Although the use of these tests can be attributed to improving instructional practice, such as the methods used to deliver instruction, not all changes have been positive. The narrowing of the curriculum to focus on tested content, increased instruction focusing on test preparation, and the pressure to help students pass the test also influenced instructional practice. While much of the latter research emphasized the effect of NCLB mandated high-stakes testing on instructional practice, the literature provides examples of the effect of high-stakes testing on teachers' instructional practice. Such illustrations come from states implementing their own form of high-stakes testing (Diamond, 2007) and analysis of testing policy on practice (Shepard, 2003). These tests range from formative assessments used to evaluate students' reading and math achievement in elementary and middle grades to high school graduation tests. Detailed below are examples of studies of high-stakes testing's influence on instructional practice prior to the federal government's testing and accountability push under NCLB.

Prior to the passage and implementation of NCLB, Vogler (2002) investigated the impact of high-stakes testing on the instructional practice of 10th grade English, math, and science teachers whose students were required to pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) in order to obtain a high school diploma. The survey-based study found that

teachers shifted their instructional practice to better instruct students in preparation for the MCAS. These practices, such as the use of open-ended questions, problem-solving activities, and the use of rubrics or scoring guides, increased. Whereas practices such as lecturing, the use of true-false questions, and textbook-based assignments decreased. The changes in instructional practice can be attributed to the expectations of the Massachusetts Department of Education as well as the types of skills needed to correctly answer questions on the MCAS. Furthermore, these changes as posited by Vogler (2002), encouraged students' development of higher-order thinking skills. These changes were not consistent when compared against teachers' year of experience. Teachers with 13-19 years of experience reported the greatest change in instructional practice. Teachers with 28-plus years of teaching experienced the least change. This could have been influenced by veteran teachers perceiving the MCAS as another education fad bound to change, their level of comfort using more student-focus, high-order thinking classroom activities, or perhaps they were already using these practices.

Vogler also investigated what factors influenced the changes in instructional practice. Considering the consequences, for both the school and students, were the primary driving forces behind the changes. The highest-rated factor of influence was the desire to help students to achieve an assessment score that will allow them to graduate (91.8%), followed by helping the school to improve MCAS scores (82.4%), a personal desire to make changes (72.2%), and a belief that students will benefit from the changes in instruction (68.3%; Vogler, 2002, p. 49). Thus, Vogler concluded that the use of high-stakes testing to assess students has an impact on the types of instructional practices employed by teachers.

In her study of the instructional practices of three exemplary elementary school science teachers after the implementation of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS),

Herbert (2007) found both positive and negative changes in the teachers' instructional practice. On one-hand, the teachers in the study found the implementation of the science TAKS shifted instruction to be more student-centered and performance-driven lessons. One teacher stated, "I have hands-on investigations at least three times a week. In the past, I would do hands-on investigations about twice per 6 weeks" (Herbert, 2007, p. 156). Moreover, teachers cited the use of a variety of instructional resources (e.g., online videos) outside of using the textbook. The teachers in the study also mentioned the use of curriculum frameworks to guide their instruction; something that had not been used prior to the implementation of the science TAKS. One teacher stated the importance of curriculum frameworks to her instruction:

> It has changed the way I instruct science tremendously. Using the [Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills] as my frameworks, I maintain a structured program, which does not vary from them. Doing so would not allow my instruction to focus on the necessary objectives for fifth grade" as stated by one teacher. (Herbert, 2007, p. 158)

Subsequently, the implementation of the science TAKS resulted in a more formalized and highly structured form of instructional planning (Herbert, 2007). Something the participants in the study felt was positive for the school as teachers worked collaboratively to plan instructional activities and improve their instructional practice with experience over the coming years.

Conversely, there were negative side effects to the implementation of the TAKS. Considering that not much emphasis had been previously given to science performance, the teachers felt the pressure to perform (Herbert, 2007). The expectation for students to perform at high levels had a deleterious effect on the teachers. One teacher, while joking, discussed suicide as a result of the pressure from testing. She stated:

> I jokingly told people last year that I was contemplating suicide because the TAKS test and if I worked at another school in our district that consistently had really low scores, I would have followed through! I ended up sick in the summer, and I attributed it to my stressful year. (Herbert, 2007, p. 157)

The impact of high-stakes testing also resulted in changes to the teachers' interactions with students. Given the pressure to perform, the teachers in the study took a more compassionate approach to their interactions with students having noticed the stress that the students were experiencing. Consequently, the implementation of NCLB did not alleviate the pressures of high-stakes testing and accountability on teachers' instructional practice. The next section delves into instructional practices in the NCLB-era.

The Effect of High-Stakes Testing on Instruction Under NCLB

When asked about NCLB's effect on student achievement, teachers believed that high-stakes testing was important to improving student achievement (Smith & Kovacs, 2011). However, the pressures for teachers to ensure that their students perform well on high-stakes testing had a detrimental effect on the on the ways in which teachers delivered instruction as well as how students engaged in content and received instruction. From the narrowing of the curriculum to focus on tested subjects to teaching to the test, high-stakes testing under NCLB changed instructional practice. This section further explicates those changes. Especially in middle grades which was the emphasis of this study.

NCLB's Impact on Middle Grades Instructional Practice

High-stakes testing as a component of the accountability requirements under NCLB had a consequential effect on middle grades instructional practice (Musoleno & White, 2010). During the implementation of NCLB, instruction in middle grades classrooms across the country was

driven by the content covered on high-stakes tests (e.g., math and reading) and the fear of the consequences of not meeting AYP. As a result, the curriculum was narrowed and more instructional time was dedicated to the teaching of testing strategies and overall test preparation (Faulkerner & Cook, 2006; Greene et al., 2008; Musoleno & White, 2008). Three survey-based studies of middle school instructional practices yielded similar findings indicating a shift in the work of teachers attributed to NCLB. These surveys showed so much of a change that the principles of effective middle grades instructional practices, as recommended by the National Middle School Association (NMSA; now known as the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE)), were being compromised.

Faulkner and Cook (2006) found that Kentucky educators more frequently used ineffective instructional practices as a result of testing and accountability pressures. Those practices included using lecture as the primary instructional delivery method and the use of worksheets. Moreover, more engaging forms of instruction, such as hands-on experimentation and reflective writing decreased. Greene et al.'s (2008) survey of Oregon educators similarly concluded the effect NCLB had on curriculum, instructional practices, and assessment.

In their survey study of Pennsylvania middle grades educators on the effect of high-stakes testing on middle school practice, Musoleno and White (2008) found similar results that the pressures of high-stakes testing resulted in teachers using instructional practices that are not conducive to the effective teaching of middle school adolescents. The use of more student-focused instructional practices (e.g., use of cooperative learning strategies, inquiry-based learning) decreased under NCLB. Moreover, under NCLB the curriculum narrowed, "the participants reported that the curriculum was broad and explanatory in nature and consistent with adolescent needs to explore their world…Since NCLB, there has been an increase in attention to

those subjects being tested on the state test" (Musoleno & White, 2008, p. 7). The ways in which teachers delivered instruction to students was guided by the pressures for teachers to ensure that students would be best prepared for high-stakes testing resulting in passing scores that would demonstrate the schools' ability to meet AYP.

Overall, the influence of NCLB on classroom instructional practice in middle grades classrooms has been adverse. As a result, teachers moved away from effective, traditional teaching methods towards that limited instructional diversity while emphasizing testing preparedness.

NCLB's Effect on the Instructional Practice of Non-Tested Content Areas

Teachers of non-tested content areas, such as socials studies, were not immune to the pressures their colleagues in the areas of math, reading, and language arts experienced (Vogler & Virtue, 2007). Simply the existence of high-stakes, mandated testing placed burden on teachers in non-tested areas even if there were no accountability consequences. Moreover, the attention given to instruction in non-tested subjects was minimized to prioritize instruction in math, reading, and language arts. Winstead (2011) found despite the educational and societal benefits of the content in social studies courses, elementary teachers allotted less than 20% of their weekly instruction to teaching the content. Furthermore, social studies was often integrated into other subjects such as language arts. A lack of a state-mandated test diminished the importance of time and effort spent on instruction. Consequentially, this loss of instructional time and practice resulted in a loss of relevancy for both the course and its importance to students (Hill-Anderson et al., 2012; Vogler & Virtue, 2007).

Federal Education Policy in a Post-NCLB Era

Fourteen years had passed since the signing of NCLB. After a vote of 359-64 in the U.S. House of Representatives on December 2, 2015 and 85-12 in the U.S. Senate on December 9, 2015, President Barack Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act into law on December 10, 2015 (National Arts Education Association, n.d.). Bringing an end to NCLB and what some considered an overreach by the federal government (Saultz, Fusarelli, & McEachin, 2017), the possibilities presented under the ESSA gave hope to state and local education leaders (Lewis, 2016). Hence, the biggest takeaway with the enactment of the ESSA was the rollback of the federal involvement in education.

ESSA: Power Returned to the States and Local Authorities

"The new law tries to preserve the spirit of No Child Left Behind, while fixing what were widely perceived as its one-size-fits-all approach," was how the newly signed ESSA was described (Korte, 2015). However, the fix not only remedied the one-size-fits-all approach to education reform, but also greatly reigned in the hand of federalism in public K-12 education. Not since the inception of the ESEA in 1965 had the federal government played such a large role in public education (Henig, Houston, & Arnold Lyon, 2017; McGuinn, 2015). Major components of federal K-12 education policy under NCLB, such as testing, accountability systems, academic content standards, and teacher quality, were previously regulated under the direction of the U.S. Department of Education. Instead of the federal government dictating the specifics as to how they will be carried out, it was now left up to the states as they crafted their plans. To date, U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos has approved individual state plans for all 50 states (Ujifusa, 2018).

Changes from NCLB to ESSA

As previously stated, the ESSA was seen as a fix or remedy to the issues that plagued NCLB (Lewis, 2016; Korte, 2015). All things considered, as a reauthorization, the ESSA carried forward the components of NCLB, but with less federal oversight and involvement. Changes from NCLB to the ESSA included a reduction in the number of high-stakes tests administered to students, states developed their own accountability measures determining the consequences for failing schools eliminating the one-sized fits all approach, an increased emphasis on rural education, and the ability by states to develop and implement academic standards that will prepare students for college and career; states are no longer bound by using Common Core State Standards (Korte, 2015). However, despite the promises of the ESSA, opponents argued that the law does not go far enough to protect the educational rights of students with disabilities and students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds (Alder-Greene, 2019).

Georgia's ESSA Plan

The development of Georgia's ESSA plan began in May 2016 with the establishment and meeting of the State Advisory Committee and corresponding work committees (GADOE, 2019a). As described in the Georgia's ESSA Plan Development Process document published by the GADOE, the State Advisory Committee was comprised of 40 members representing various stakeholders including educators, parents, students, members of various state agencies, and policymakers (GADOE, n.d.a). There were six work committees comprised of 20 members each; five members representing the Georgia Department of Education (GADOE) and 15 members from various stakeholder groups. Each committee was chaired by a representative of the GADOE and key stakeholder such as a school district superintendent. The committees were: (1) accountability committee, (2) assessment committee, (3) communications committee, (4)

education and leader development committee, (5) education of the whole child committee, and (6) federal programs to support school improvement committee (GADOE, n.d.a).

The GADOE conducted eight feedback sessions across the state to gather input from parents, students, educators, businesspersons, and other interested parties (GADOE, 2019a). Feedback sessions were also held with each superintendent's advisory council. An online survey to solicit input was also administered. After reviewing all feedback and input, Georgia submitted its plan to the USDOE in September 2017 (GADOE, n.d.a). Upon revising the plan based on feedback from the USDOE, Georgia's ESSA plan was approved on January 19, 2018 (GADOE, 2019a). The implementation of the plan began in the 2018-2019 school year.

Annual Assessments

Georgia's state-level testing requirements detailed in the state's ESSA plan follows the guidelines in the federal ESSA law. The decision to follow the exact guidelines would allow the state to "pursue maximum flexibility allowed the federal statue while ensuring validity, reliability, and comparability of state assessment options" (GADOE, n.d.b). The guidelines require states to test students yearly in reading/English language arts and math in grades 3-8 and once in high school (USDOE, n.d.). Students are also tested in science once in grades 3-5, 6-8, and high school, respectively. Georgia's testing requirements under the ESSA are a reduction in the amount of testing under given NCLB (GADOE, 2018a). Under NCLB, Georgia students were tested annually in grades 1-8 in reading, English language arts, math, science, and social studies under the state's Criterion Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) testing system; students in the first and second grade were not tested during the 2013-2014 school year due to budget constraints (GADOE, 2014). Per NCLB, all students, including students with disabilities and English language learners were tested. High school students were assessed in math, reading,

and science once over the course of four years as part of the Georgia High School Graduation Test (GADOE, n.d.c).

A pilot study is currently underway that will allow for school districts to develop their own assessment systems to replace the state's assessment system—the Georgia Milestones Assessment System (GMAS; Dalton, 2019). There are three school districts participating in the study. They are Cobb County, Putnam County, and the Georgia MAP Assessment Partnership, a consortium of 10 school districts from around the state. The state applied for a waiver from the USDOE to pilot the assessments. It will be some time before the state receives final approval from the federal government to scale-up and implement the testing systems.

The Georgia Milestones Assessment System is the state's summative testing system administering end-of-grade (EOG) assessments for reading/English language arts, math, science, and social studies in grades 3-8 and end-of-course (EOC) assessments in 10 high school level courses designated by the Georgia State Board of Education (GADOE, n.d.d). Scores on EOC assessments are considered to be the final exam for the course and are 20% of students' final grade for the course. See Table 1, Georgia Milestone End-of-Grade Assessments by Grade Level, for state assessments for grades 3-8. High school students take EOCs in 9th grade literature and composition, American literature and composition, Algebra I or Coordinate Algebra, Geometry or Analytic Geometry, Biology, Physical Science, United States History, and Economics/Business/Free Enterprise (GADOE, n.d.d).

Table 1

Georgia Milestone End-of-Grade Assessments by Grade Level

Grade Level	Reading/English Language Arts	Math	Science	Social Studies
3	X	X		
4	X	X		
5	X	X	X	X
6	X	X		
7	X	X		
8	X	X	X	X

The development of Georgia's assessment portion of the ESSA plan was completed by a workgroup under the direction of the GADOE as part of the state's ESSA plan development process (GADOE, n.d.a). The work committee was comprised of 20 education stakeholders from across the state and chaired by the deputy superintendent of assessment and accountability at the GADOE and the superintendent of Coweta County Schools.

Georgia's Accountability System: The College and Career Readiness Performance Index

Georgia's College and Career Readiness Performance Index was first implemented in 2012, replacing the AYP requirement of NCLB (GADOE, 2018b). The state was able to shift to using the CCRPI after being granted an ESEA waiver. Under the CCRPI, the state's accountability system paints a more holistic measure of the effectiveness of schools in preparing students for post-secondary opportunities that include attending college or entering to the workforce. During the 2017-2018 school year a redesigned CCRPI was implemented (GADOE, 2018b). Changes to the accountability system were needed to be better align with the ESSA. Thus scores prior to 2018 cannot be compared to scores earned during prior school years.

The CCRPI scores are out of total of 100 points (GADOE, 2018b). Elementary and middle schools earn points in four main indicators: (1) content mastery, (2) progress, (3) closing

gaps, and (4) readiness. High school scores are also comprised of these four main indicators as well as the school's graduation rate (GADOE, 2018b). The content mastery indicator score is determined by students performance on math, English/language arts, science, and social studies end-of-grade and end-of-course assessments as a part of the Georgia Milestones Assessment System. Scores from the Georgia Alternative Assessment (GAA) is also included. Ninety-five percent of students and 95% of students in each subgroup must participate to fulfill accountability requirements. The progress indicator measures students growth in the areas of math and English/language arts from one school year to the next. Student Growth Percentiles (SGP) are used to measure the amount of progress students achieve. The progress of English language learners towards English proficiency is also calculated in this portion of a school's CCRPI score (GADOE, 2018b). The progress made to close the achievement gap of subgroups (e.g., students with disabilities, students living in poverty, English language learners) is calculated by the closing gaps indicator. The readiness indicator measures students participation in activities that will prepare them for post-secondary life. Activities include enrollment in enrichment courses and attendance. The high school graduation indicator addresses whether students are graduating from high school in four or five years.

A middle school CCPRI score, the focus of this study, is calculated using a weighted formula of the four main indicators: 30% content mastery + 35% progress + 15% closing gaps + 20% readiness (GADOE, 2018b). The CCRPI scores range from 0-100. School climate and financial efficiency star ratings are included as part of a school's CCRPI score. The school climate rating is a score from 1-5 that measures a school climate based on the perceptions of a school's climate based on survey data from students, parents, and school staff, school discipline, a safe and substance-free environment, and student attendance (GADOE, 2018b). The financial

efficiency star rating ranges from 0.5-5 and evaluates per-pupil spending and overall student achievement compared to other school districts.

Georgia schools not meeting expectations under the CCRPI may be targeted for support as Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) school or Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI) school (GADOE, 2018b). Criteria for CSI schools include the lowest 5% of Title I schools when ranked by their three-year CCRPI averages, and all high schools that have a four-year graduation rate less than or equal to 67%. Targeted Support Improvement schools are schools with subgroups that are consistently underperforming or need additional targeted support. The support provided to these schools is as turnaround eligible school or with a charter and strategic waiver performance contract.

Georgia's Strategic Waiver School Systems

Formerly known as the Investing in Educational Excellence (IE2), the strategic waiver school system (SWSS) was created in 2015 under House Bill 502 and replaced the IE2 system (GADOE, n.d.e). The SWSS is a partnership contract between local school boards and the Georgia State Board of Education (GASBOE; GADOE, n.d.e). Under the partnership, schools districts are granted flexibility from state statutes and rules in exchange for increased student achievement and greater accountability(GASBOE; GADOE, n.d.e). Thus, school districts can design and implement innovative programming to improve student achievement. In the five-year strategic plan, SWSS school districts outline which statues and rules they are seeking a waiver, the baseline targets for achievement, and the consequences should a district or school fail to meet achievement targets (GADOE, 2016). Areas that schools are granted flexibility include class-size and reporting requirements, certification requirements, educational programs, competencies and core curriculum, online learning, graduation requirements, salary schedule requirements, and

school choice. Waivers cannot be granted for federal, state, local laws, statutes, regulations, or court orders relating to civil rights, protection of health and safety, or unlawful conduct (GADOE, 2016). The accountability metrics used to evaluate districts' and schools' performance are high school graduation rates, performance on the SAT or ACT, scores from end-of-grade and end-of-course assessments, advanced placement scores, and international baccalaureate participation or any other agreed up accountability metrics (GADOE, 2016). These metrics contribute to districts' and schools' CCRPI scores. Of Georgia's 180 local school districts, 132 are strategic waiver school systems (GADOE, 2019b).

The Role of Local School Districts in Instructional Policy Development

In the past, local school districts were excluded in the implementation of state-level instructional policy (Spillane, 1996). Schools had become the focus of state reforms, with the district as the setting with no specific role (Elmore, 1993). State and local relations were once referred to as a "zero sum model" where the entity that provides the funding makes the decisions (Furhman & Elmore, 1990, p. 83). However, the increases in policymaking at the state-level has generated an increase in policymaking at the local level (Elmore, 1993; Furhman & Elmore, 1990). Those increases resulted in a "positive sum" model where school districts, particularly in high-performing districts, developed local policies exceeding those of the state (Elmore, 1993, p. 99). The increases in state instructional policy at the local level also created differences across districts instead of uniformity.

Spillane (1996) contended that local school districts play an essential role in implementing state education reforms. The involvement of school districts at the state level increased the likelihood that policy was implemented appropriately. Additionally, the policy developed at the district-level mattered because it influenced state policymaking efforts to

communicate policy messages to other local districts and practitioners. A later study conducted by Spillane (1999) yielded similar findings. In the study of nine Michigan school districts, Spillane (1999) found that district context contributed to the implementation of math and science state standards. Districts had difficulty aligning local policies with state policies due to a lack of support from the state and confusing policy messages. Districts also exhibited an unwillingness to implement the standards as directed by the state, arguing that the reforms were not aligned with the local district agenda. Hence, school districts' role in the development and implementation of state policy should not be overlooked.

Suburban Title I Schools

A search of suburban schools, much less suburban Title I schools, yielded various results. What was found focused on issues of race, resegregation, and the consequences of shifting demographics (Rotberg, 2020; Jones, 2018; Frankenberg, 2012). Over the decades the definition of suburban schools has changed as they have become more diverse. Frankenberg (2012) maintained that racial changes have contributed to suburbs becoming more diverse. Additionally, these changes varied depending upon geographic location. The differences in location can be an entire region (e.g., Rust Belt) or different areas of the same city.

What began as a migration of White families to the outer rings of the cities from the early 1900s and well into the 1950s and 1960s, bloomed into majority White communities as federal housing policies made it difficult for Black families to move into these communities (Shiller, 2016). Urban-suburban segregation was further compounded by U. S. Supreme Court cases such as *Milliken v. Bradley* (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012). In *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974), the Supreme Court ruled that federal courts did not have the power to enforce a cross-district desegregation plan that would integrate Detroit’s schools. The desegregation plan called for the

integration of Detroit's schools across urban and suburban districts. However, to do so, it would have to be proven that the suburban districts or the state contributed to Detroit's segregated schools. The decision by the Supreme Court sheltered suburban schools from the remedies of racial integration. Consequently, this gave White families additional motivation to flee to the suburbs (Tefera et al., 2011).

As demographic shifts have occurred and more and more people have ventured out of urban centers these once idyllic communities now experience many of the same challenges experienced by urban communities (Shiller, 2016; Tefera et al., 2011). Those challenges include overcrowded schools, traffic congestion, and poor infrastructure. Demographic shifts in suburban areas have also resulted in the changing perceptions of schools as more and more suburban schools are identified as Title I schools. One perception change was that academic standards will be lowered resulting in a poorer quality education (Wiley, Shircliffe, & Morley, 2012).

Next, I introduce the theoretical framework of sensemaking. The section begins with an overview broad overview of sensemaking as explicated by Weick (1995). It is followed by Spillane et al.'s (2002a) application of sensemaking for teachers and the implementation of education policy.

Sensemaking Theory

Sensemaking theory emanates from the field of organizational sciences (Weick, 1995). Based on the work of Weick (1995), organizations have their own unique dynamics upon which they must understand in order to make sense of structures and influences within and outside of the organization. A simplistic definition of sensemaking is the act of "making sense" (Weick, 1995, p. 4). However, despite its simplicity, sensemaking is quite profound in nature. In fact, sensemaking is often mistakenly used synonymously with the work of interpretation. Weick

(1995) contended that sensemaking and interpretation are not tantamount. Interpretation is a component of sensemaking. It alone emphasizes text whereas sensemaking delves deeper to understand the development of the text as well as how it is read and understood. Sensemaking, as posited by Weick (1995), is about authorship as well as interpretation, creativity as well as discovery (p. 8). Thus, sensemaking is more than understanding. It is "to construct, filter, frame, create facticity, and render the subjective into something tangible" (Weick, 1995, p. 14). That extends far beyond a base-level of understanding a concept, idea, action, or event.

Sensemaking theory is rooted in seven main properties (Weick, 1995). They are: (1) grounded in identity construction; (2) retrospective; (3) enactive in sensible environments; (4) social; (5) ongoing, (6) focused on and by extracted cues; and (7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. Each of these principles is briefly explicated below.

- The first property, grounded in identity construction, recognizes the individual in the sensemaking process. "Sensemaking begins with a sensemaker" (Weick, 1995, p. 18). The sensemaker is always undergoing change and development. Always considering their self-image and how others view them. The individual's role and relationship to the organization is also important in identity development.
- Retrospective, the second property of sensemaking, implies looking backward but with an eye on the present. Past experiences help the sensemaker to understand or make sense of present occurrences. Weick (1995) maintained, "What is now, at the present moment, underway will determine the meaning of whatever just occurred" (p. 27). With different positions in the organization come different perspectives. Even though the goals of everyone in the organization are the same, different positions (e.g., upper-level

management versus front-line staff) influence the sensemaker's perspective. This can result in different understanding of the same goal or idea and how to achieve it.

- The fact that individuals are not unaware of their environments is the premise of the enactive of sensible environments property of sensemaking. Rather, people construct their own environment. Or, as Weick stated (1995), "…people are very much a part of their own environment. They act, and in doing so create the materials that become constraints and opportunities" (p. 31). He referred to this as enactment. Therefore, the environment is an active atmosphere filled with individuals and stimuli that effects sensemaking.
- Others, either imagined or physically present, contribute to an individual's sensemaking. Hence, the social property of sensemaking explains that sensemaking does not occur in isolation. "Sensemaking is never solitary because what a person does internally is contingent on others" (Weick, 1995, p. 40). Moreover, sensemaking from a social perspective includes when people collaborate and work together on equal, not shared, meanings. Or, when all individuals have equal give and take.
- "Sensemaking never stops" (Weick, 1995, p. 43). Instead, it is ongoing, the continuation of flow because "people are always in the middle of things" (p. 43). However, within the ongoing property of sensemaking, interruptions in the flow do occur. These interruptions create an arousal indicating that attentions must be given to a particular area. It is also a signal that change has occurred. This creates an emotional response linking emotions and sensemaking.
- Sensemaking can be quite obvious as individuals tend to make sense of the end result or outcome rather than the process it took to achieve it. Sensemaking, as maintained by

Weick (1995), "tends to be swift, which means we are more likely to see products than process" (p. 49). Therefore, it is important to slow down and pay attention to cues during the sensemaking process to draw from them and elaborate. These extracted cues or seeds are the intricate details and observations one uses to make sense of occurrences around them. Additionally, sensemakers must determine the meaning of the cues, putting them into context and order.

- The driven by plausibility rather than accuracy property of sensemaking asserts that "The strength of sensemaking as a perspective derives from the fact that it does not rely on accuracy and its model is not object perception. Instead, sensemaking is about plausibility, pragmatics, coherence, reasonableness, creation, invention, and instrumentality" (Weick, 1995, p. 57). Referring to two earlier mentioned properties, ongoing and focused on and by extracted cues, plausibility allows for flexibility in sensemaking. Individuals may not have time to attend to great detail given the balancing of other organizational activities and projects. Furthermore, seeking the exact meaning of a cue in context is difficult given multiple meanings and audiences. Sensemaking is more plausible given the inability to pinpoint accurate details and meanings. Time is also a concern.

These seven properties of sensemaking identified and defined by Weick (1995) are interdependent yet work together as individuals and organizations make sense of the occurrences and influences happening inside and outside of the organization. Weick's theory, in various forms, has also been used to understand how teachers and school leaders make sense of policies as well as how policies are implemented. Sensemaking theory, as applied to education, is explained further below.

Teachers' Sensemaking and Education Policy Implementation

Sensemaking theory has been used in K-12 education research to understand how teachers and school leaders make sense of new policies and their implementation in the school or classroom (Allen & Penuel, 2015; Rangel, Bell, & Monroy, 2019; Rigby, 2015; Schmidt & Datnow, 2005; Spillane et al., 2002b; Sumbera, Pazey, & Lashley, 2014). A highly cited example in the literature is Coburn's (2005) study of how California elementary school teachers made sense of a new reading policy. Using a case study methodology, Coburn sought to understand how collective sensemaking in professional learning communities influenced practice in the classroom. Findings from the study showed that collective sensemaking affects how teachers interpret, adopt, and implement policy in their classroom. Moreover, it affects how teachers perceive, sort, embrace, and discard policy messages. The conversations teachers have with and amongst each other in both formal and informal settings plays an important role in how teachers understand and subsequent implement policy in the classroom by way of instructional practice.

After a thorough review of the literature, Spillane et al. (2002a) developed a framework through which both education policy sensemaking and implementation were analyzed. From the examination of previous implementation studies, Spillane et al. found most of these studies were analyzed using principal-agent and rational choice theories. These theories are based on assumptions of human behavior that presume that the agent is driven by self-interest or that one's choice is their primary focus and not influenced by outside influence or preferences. Other implementation studies pointed to the policy ambiguity, with the unwillingness of the implementing agent to comply, limited ability to change behavior, or a lack of capacity (e.g., knowledge and skills). The presumption regarding the failure to appropriately implement policy

was built on the implementer's failure to understand what the policy is asking of them, thus ignoring the role of human cognition or sensemaking (Spillane et al., 2002a). Therefore, their purpose in developing the framework was to better understand how local actors, those within K-12 schools, make sense of policy initiatives and the conditions under which sensemaking occurs which results in how policy is implemented. The framework, Spillane et al. (2002a) contended, is an "integrative framework that…is designed to make transparent the cognitive component of the implementation process by identifying a set of constructs and the relations among the constructs" (p. 388). Moreover, as maintained by Spillane et al.:

> The interpretive or sense-making dimension of the implementation process is designed to underscore the need to take account of, and unpack implementing agents' sense-making from and about policy. Moving beyond a purely behavioral focus on what implementing agents do, we construct an interpretation of their own practice in light of the messages, and draw conclusions about potential changes to their practice as a result. (p. 392)

The implementation of policy is only as effective as those that unpack the policy and put it into practice. Thus, how individuals perceive the policy, their background (academic, social, etc.), the work environment, and their role in the implementation of the policy plays an important role. It is these components that Spillane et al.'s framework addressed. They are further examined below.

The Individual as the Sensemaker in Policy Implementation

When policies are not implemented appropriately, it is often seen as an attempt to sabotage or modify the policy (Spillane et al., 2002a). However, that may not be the case. Instead, teachers' prior knowledge and beliefs can impede policy from being properly implemented. "Individuals must use their prior knowledge and experience to notice, make sense

of, interpret, and react to incoming stimuli—all the while actively constructing meaning from their interactions with the environment, of which policy is part" (Spillane et al., 2002a, p. 394). Thus, the act of sense-making extends far beyond interpretation or idea-sharing. It is active, not passive; an idea shared by Weick (1995). New information is understood based upon previously held beliefs and experiences serving as a lens through which one processes, codes, organizes, and interprets the information taking into consideration the environment and stimuli around them. Spillane et al. (2002a) referred to this using a term used in developmental psychology—"schema" (p. 394). Schema are the knowledge-based structures individuals use to absorb and understand the world and make predictions based on past experiences, knowledge, and beliefs. Schemas also allow individuals to recall memories in order to interpret and understand current realities. They are not the encoding of information, but rather complex in nature, being rearranged ensuring that new information is not perceived as something old with a new spin when in fact it is new and different. Lastly, because the framework is cognitive-based, Spillane et al. also addressed the challenges associated with assessing and applying the schema. Individuals may focus on the superficial meaning and understandings of previous experiences instead of drawing up their deeper meaning.

Teachers' prior knowledge and beliefs can also result in different interpretations of the same messages or experiences (Spillane et al., 2002a). The differences in interpretations can be amongst teachers unpacking a new science curriculum to differences between teachers and policymakers. Consequently, as demonstrated in the research, these differences can be attributed to low buy-in and rejection of policy reform efforts (Spillane et al., 2002a). This can also lead to misunderstandings that limit or stall progress in the implementation process. It can also result in

the implementing agent missing the deeper meaning of the policy instead drawing on surface-level superficial components. This can also be due to the novice experience of the implementers.

One's values, motivated reasoning, and emotions also play a role in sense-making (Spillane et al., 2002a). In essence, people are biased in their interpretations based upon their values and beliefs thus clouding their judgment and ability to be receptive or open to making sense of new information. Spillane et al. (2002a) contended that "one may jump to conclusions and focus unduly on familiar aspects in understanding new policies or reform initiatives, and be ready to claim, 'We already do that in our school!'" (p. 402). The result is stifled, misguided, or ineffective implementation of policy due to one's inability to process new information. Furthermore, Spillane et al. (2002a) went on further to explain how this form of self-affirmation bias hinders progress stating:

> To accept reform and become its advocates could cost teachers some loss in positive self-image. Teachers might become advocated by deciding that they were "ahead of the curve" and already teaching in ways consistent with the reform. Or they might be motivated to discount the reform idea, seeing it as inconsistent with "the reality" that they "know best." (p. 403).

New policy and reform efforts are understood through the lens of those who are in the process of sensemaking and implementing the ideas of an outside source or influence. Their purpose, self-worth, being, motivation, beliefs, values, and emotions all play a complex role in sensemaking and subsequent implementation.

While teachers may work in isolation in their classroom, the nature of people is to be social, interacting and engaging with others both similar and different from themselves (Spillane et al., 2002). The diversity within each individual (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, social class,

political affiliation) creates avenues for multiple avenues for social interaction. Each lens contributes to an individual's worldview, shaping how they perceive the world around them (Spillane et al., 2002a). In a social setting, such as a school, these varying worldviews or perceptions influence sensemaking. Coburn's (2002) above mentioned study is an example of how the interactions amongst teachers in formal and informal settings shaped how a new reading policy was understood and enacted in the classroom. The organizational setting in which these interactions occur is also impactful. Not only are teachers engaging in meaningful dialogue, but others, such as school leaders are also contributing to the conversation. With them, they bring not only their own beliefs, values, and experiences, but also the role within the school and level of support for the implementation of the policy or reform. School leaders also influence the messages teachers receive, consequently effecting sensemaking and implementation.

Implementing Education Policy

Honig (2006) maintained that the implementability and success of education policy is predicated on the interaction between the policy design, people implementing and impacted by the policy, and the place where the implementation occurs. Or, as further explicated by Honig, it is the "how and why interactions among these dimensions shape implementation in particular ways" (p. 14). Each of the dimensions or factors (policy, people, and places) of education policy implementation are briefly explained below.

Policy. Policy, when used within a contemporary framework, is comprised of three main components: (1) goals, (2) targets, and (3) tools (Honig, 2006). To further understand the role of policy in implementation, these factors are examined to understand how they influence the process. When implementing policy, individuals must ask if the goals accurately reflect the intended outcomes; moreover, all the goals attainable. Next, when implementing policy, it is

important to consider if the target is focused on the appropriate audience. Or, how the actors involved will be impacted by the policy. Lastly, the use of tools (e.g., mandates) to power or advance the policy should also be considered.

People. Individuals, not only those directed affected by the policy, have an impact on implementation (Honig, 2006). These individuals not only include those who are directly involved in the effort to execute the plan or policy, but also those outside of the scope of implementation. For example, individuals who are not the intended target of the implementation, but still exert some level of power or influence over how the program or policy is fulfilled. Other people involved in implementation include those with professional affiliations or community groups and organizations.

Places. Where implementation occurs influences the degree to which it is actualized (Honig, 2006). In education, common places where implementation occurs include state education agencies, local school districts, schools, and individuals classrooms. Other contexts include geographic locations such as rural or urban settings. Additionally, the place where implementation occurs maybe influenced by outside institutions (e.g., a school affected by outside community organizations).

Overall, Honig (2006) maintained that the interaction between these dimensions, both directly and indirectly, play a role in realizing implementation. Contributing at various levels, the relationship between policy, people, and places has the capability to power implementation to fulfillment. Or, hinder its progress resulting in little or no change.

Policy Implementation in the Classroom

The implementation of education policy in the classroom often has a different look and feel from what the policymaker intended (Elmore & McLaughlin (1988). Elmore and

McLaughlin (1988) attributed that to the three levels through which education policy and reform flow. These interconnected levels—policy, administration, and practice—all play a unique role in implementation. Hence, as posited by Elmore and McLaughlin, "each level has its own rewards and incentives, its own set of special problems, and its own view of how the educational system works" (p. v.). The policy establishes the conditions on which the administration and practitioners (e.g., teachers) are to carry out the reform. However, it cannot control how or the local factors that influence how, the policy will be carried out. Administration, based on the details of the policy, formulates the guidelines or expectations for effective practice (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1998). The practitioner or teacher, using their knowledge and experience, implements the policy in their classroom. Thus, how the policy is implemented in the classroom is not consistent with the policy directives or administrative expectations. McLaughlin (2005) in her discussion of the Rand Change Agent study's finding that "it is exceedingly difficult for policy to change practice" concluded that the study's finding has become a "truism" of policy implementation (p. 59). The factors at the local level of policy implementation are out of the hands of the higher-level policy maker. Or, as more explicitly stated by the findings in the Rand study:

> Local choices about how (or whether) to put a policy into practice have more significance for policy outcomes than do such features such as technology, program design, funding levels, or governance requirements. Change ultimately is a problem of the smallest unit. What happens as a result of a policy depends on how policy is interpreted and transformed at each point in the process, and finally on the response of the individual at the end of the line (McLaughlin, 2005, p. 60).

Thus, the capacity and will of those at the local level determine a policy's success or failure. The variability across locales only further complicates the overarching policy goals.

For the classroom teacher, the implementation of a new education policy is not simply a change in their everyday practice. Implementation from the teacher's perspectives, as Elmore and McLaughlin (1988) contended, is "getting through the material, adjusting their routines to new supervisors and new roles, meeting new reporting requirements, implementing new testing procedures, and communicating new expectations to students" (p. 8). Even when those changes are counter to what they believe is in the best interest of students.

Summary

When President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act into law in 2015 it ushered in a new era in federal education policy (Heise, 2017; Saultz, Fusarelli, & McEachrin, 2017). With the change in the law came the reduction in high-stakes testing that had been a primary component of the No Child Left Behind Act. The prevalence of high-stakes testing had implications on classroom instruction and the types of courses offered to students (Diamond, 2007; Herbert, 2007; Volger, 2002). In the middle grades, No Child Left Behind's effect on instructional practice included the use of ineffective instructional practices such as the use of lectures and worksheets as the primary methods of instruction (Musoleno & White, 2010).

Georgia's Every Student Succeeds Act Plan was approved by the U.S. Department of Education in 2018 (GADOE, 2019a). Implementation of the plan began during the 2018-2019 school year. Georgia's plan outlines the end-of grade and end-of-course tests students in grades 3-12 take as a part of the Georgia Milestones Assessment System. In the middle grades, students in grades 6-8 take the math, reading, and English language arts Georgia Milestones assessments. Students in the eighth grade also take assessments in science and social studies. This represents a

reduction in testing as sixth and seventh grade students were previously administered science and social studies end-of-grade assessments (GADOE, 2018a). The College and Career Readiness Performance Index, the state's accountability system, is also described in the plan. It is calculated using multiple measures such as Georgia Milestones Assessment System test scores, a school's climate rating, and financial responsibility.

Georgia's strategic wavier school system partnership grants school districts flexibility in exchange for increased accountability and student achievement (GADOE, n.d.e). The agreement between the state board of education and local boards of educations permits the design and implementation innovation instructional programming with the goal of improving student outcomes. The increase in instructional policy has increased as state policy has increased (Elmore, 1993). Spillane (1996) maintained that the increase in districts participation in instructional policy is important. The work of local school districts matters.

Weick's (1995) Sensemaking theory is used to explain how individuals make sense of the environment around them. In the context of education, Spillane et al.'s (2002a) policy implementation and cognition framework explains how teachers make sense of policy. Factors that influence their sensemaking include their personal beliefs, prior experiences, and the messages communicated by school leaders. Honig (2006) maintained that the implementation of education policy is influenced by policy, people, and place. Consequently, policy implementation in the classroom often looks different than it was intended (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988).

Next, I introduce the study's methodology in chapter 3. The chapter begins with an explanation of the research design followed by a more detailed explanation of the method

employed during the study including a description of case study design, the study's setting, study participants, data collection instrumentation, and data analysis.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The literature demonstrates that high-stakes testing, such as state-level testing required under Georgia's ESSA plan, does affect teachers' instructional practice. The research questions to better understand this phenomenon since the implementation of the Georgia ESSA Plan are:

1) How do suburban Georgia middle grades teachers' sensemaking of the Georgia Every Student Succeeds Act Plan end-of-grade assessment requirements affect their instructional practice?
2) How do suburban Georgia middle grades school leaders support teachers' instructional practice as they implement annual assessment requirements under the Georgia Every Student Succeeds Act Plan?

Research Design

A qualitative design was the methodological approach for this study. Qualitative design, as maintained by Maxwell (2013), is not a structured, methodological approach to research. Instead, qualitative design is flexible, allowing the researcher to construct a plan of action that is evolving, interactive, and reflective. Moreover, the ability to make meaning as well as elucidate the stories and perspectives of others was that reason I chose qualitative inquiry to conduct the study. Patton (2015) posited that "Qualitative research is personal" (p. 3). As the instrument of inquiry, my personal experiences, background, and interpretation of the world all contribute to and influence my work as a qualitative researcher. Patton provides seven examples of contributions of qualitative research ranging from learning from how things work to making comparisons (2015). For the purposes of this study, Patton's third contribution of qualitative inquiry, "capturing stories to understand people's perspectives and experiences," (p. 13) is

aligned with the study's purpose in conducting an in-depth case study about how suburban middle school teachers made sense of Georgia's ESSA Plan end-of-grade assessments as demonstrated by their instructional practice. As well as the support they received from school leaders.

This section of the chapter defines and describes case study research as well as provides the rationale for why it was chosen to conduct the study. This section also explicates the specific details (e.g., context and participants) that were used to conduct the study.

Case Study

Case study, as maintained by Yin (2014), is a form of empirical research in which the researcher examines a current phenomenon in its real-world context in great depth. This methodological approach is most appropriate when the proposed research questions ask "how" and "why," or are explanatory in nature (Yin, 2014). Yin (1981) also described case study as a distinct research methodologically that can be performed using a variety of data collection methods, incorporating qualitative and quantitative data. It is a research strategy similar to an experiment or simulation. Described broadly, case study involves the in-depth examination of a case such a program, organization, process, event, individual, or activity (Patton, 2015). The three primary types of case study are exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory.

While Patton (2015) contended that there is no agreed upon definition of what a case is, the boundaries of a case are important in defining what will be examined as well as the data collection methods used. Or, as explicated by Yin, the boundaries of a case, " distinguish data about the subject of your case study (the "phenomenon") from the data external to the case (the "context"; 2014, p. 34). Stake (1995), defined a case is "a specific, a complex, functioning thing" in which the working parts under examination come together to explain the phenomenon under

study (p. 2). The boundaries of a case include time, place, activity, and context (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Patton (2015) identified case study as both a design and a method of inquiry. It is also guided by theoretical constructs and empirical units (Patton, 2015). Used in a variety of fields in the social sciences, including education, case study research has been used to understand how programs and people within the field of education perform and function (Stake, 1995). Case study research is unique in that it is not conducted to understand other or similar cases. Instead, case study research allows for the unique attributes and characteristics of the case under study to be fully understood, in context, and as it operates.

Flyvbjerg (2006) identified five misconception of using case study. These misconceptions addressed the perceived fallacies of using a case study design. The misconceptions included the inability to obtain generalizable findings from a single-case study, the practical, concrete knowledge obtained from case study are not valuable, case studies are biased and side with the assumptions held by the researcher, it is challenging to develop propositions and theories from case study, and case study is best suited for generating hypotheses. The careful development and analysis of case study is important to overcoming challenges associated with the methodological approach. For example, Flyvbjerg (2006) argued that the generalizability of a case can be improved by the strategic selection of a case. Or, the subjective bias, or the researcher's preconceived notions or assumptions, about a case is addressed by the ability of case study to focus on the real-life in-depth experiences in context. Overall, Flyvbjerg maintained that case study is a vital methodological approach for the development of social science research (2006).

Yin (2014) identified five components of case study design. Those components included: (1) the research questions; (2) the identification of propositions; (3) the unit(s) of analysis; (4) the link between the data and the propositions; and (5) the criteria to interpret the findings. Components one, two, and three were considered prior to the start of the study and assisted with identification of data sources. Components four and five guided the analysis of the data. Each of the five components, taking into consideration the aim of this study, are briefly explicated below.

The research questions. Yin (2014) maintained that case study methodology is most appropriate when the proposed research questions ask "how" and "why" or are explanatory in nature. Moreover, research questions must also have both substance and form. This is important as the researcher considers the context in which the study will be established as another methodology could be more suited to achieve the aims of the study. The research questions posed in this study are explanatory in nature as the purpose of the research is to illustrate how education policy, specifically Georgia's ESSA Plan, affects teachers' instructional practice.

The identification of the propositions. The identification of the propositions of the study brings attention to what should be examined in the study (Yin, 2014). The focus of this study was the effect of education policy, specifically the testing requirements of Georgia's ESSA Plan, on suburban middle school teachers' instructional practice as they made sense of the policy.

Unit(s) of analysis. Considering how the case is defined and bound is important to how it is analyzed (Yin, 2014). It is the focus of the study (e.g., person, program, object). Yin (2014) contended that the definition of your case should be related to your research questions. Moreover, your case should be bounded. Bounding the case clearly establishes the unit of analysis and helps to clarify the types of data collected in the study. The bounded system, or

case, for this study was Stanton Middle School, a suburban middle school in Georgia. Stanton Middle School is the unit of analysis.

The link between the data and the propositions. This component of case study design includes the strategies and techniques used to analysis data collected in the study (Yin, 2014). Such techniques include pattern matching and time-series analysis. Within-case analysis was the strategy used to analyze the data (Miles et al., 2014). Data analysis is further described in a later section of this chapter.

The criteria to interpret the findings. When interpreting the findings of a case study the research should identify and clarify rival explanations that may arise from findings in the data collection (Yin, 2014). Rival explanations rule out or clarify opposing or contradictory explanations of the data. The inclusion of a reflexivity or subjectivity statement is one approach to addressing rival explanations. A researcher subjectivity statement is explained further in this chapter.

Rationale for a Single-Case Study

Yin (2014) compared a single-case study to a single experiment arguing that a single-case study and single experiment can be justified on the same conditions. The decision to conduct a single-case study is predicated on the phenomenon under investigation. For example, an index case can be used to document the first case or incidence of a phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Yin identified five rationales for conducting a single-case study; he acknowledged that there could be more than the five he identified and discussed (2014). Those rationales are: (1) critical, (2) unusual; (3) common; (4) revelatory; and (5) longitudinal. A critical case produces generalizable knowledge that if the phenomenon occurs in a particular setting, the same is true in all similar settings and vice versa; or the propositions of the study are believed to be true in all similar

settings (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2014). An unusual single-case study is an extreme case and deviates from theoretical norms. A common case emphasizes the occurrences in everyday situations. A revelatory case investigates a phenomenon that was previously inaccessible to be researched. A longitudinal case examines a case in multiple points of time. The theoretical framework must also be considered when deciding whether to employ a single or multi-case study. When done correctly, single-case study design has the potential to generate generalizable findings and contribute to the development of theory (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2014).

The units of analysis must also be deliberated when choosing a single-case design (Yin, 2014). In holistic case study design, the focus is on the entire entity and not the subparts (Stake, 1995). Embedded case study design analyzes data across subunits in an organization such as the clinics in a hospital. Both have their strengths and weaknesses. Holistic case study design is beneficial when there is only one unit of analysis. However, it could results in a case that lacks depth and insufficient data. Embedded case design utilizes multiple units of analysis. However, the analysis of those units may be uneven resulting in one subunit being more prominent than the others.

For the purposes of this study, a holistic single-case study design was used to conduct the study. The decision to use a holistic case study design was determined by the units of analysis—Stanton Middle School with teachers and school leaders as the data points. Stanton Middle School (SMS) was the case or setting for the study as it was representation of the middle schools within the larger school district. The study context and setting are discussed next. The units of analysis are discussed later in the chapter.

Case Description

Careful attention must be given to the selection of a case (Patton, 2015; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Stake (1995) argued that the first determining factor when deciding on a case should be to maximize what can be learned from the case. Patton (2015) contended that meticulous consideration must be used when deciding a single case. Purposeful sampling was used to identify the study's case. Purposeful sampling "focuses on selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study" (Patton, 2015, p. 264). Through purposeful sampling, the researcher can obtain case specific insight into the phenomenon under study. Furthermore, purposeful sampling is basis of qualitative research. It should also be aligned with the purpose of your research study, research questions, and subsequent data collection. Thinking more strategically about the best sampling design that aligns with one's research goals and objectives, Patton offered more specific purposeful sampling strategies that are more targeted to the goals and objectives of one's research design. The factors that were considered when choosing SMS as the case were the school's identification as a suburban middle school and the context or school district the school is a part of. The context of the study is described next.

Context. Williams County Schools (WCS) is a large suburban school district located outside of a large urban city in Georgia. The district educated more that 100,000 students during the 2019-2020 school year. Williams County Schools have received numerous awards and recognitions including being recognized a Best-in-the-State Employer by Forbes and by the Georgia School Board Association for operating an effective and efficiently run school board. The district's Career and College Readiness Performance Index score for 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years were in the 80s, above the state average of 76.6 and 78.8, respectively. Williams County Schools is considered a high-performing school district with strong local

control. District leadership has been in place for many years with little turnover. Additionally, several members of the school board have served multiple terms.

Williams County Schools has been granted a waiver as part of Georgia's Strategic Waivers School Systems (SWSS) under House Bill 502 (GADOE, n.d.e). The waiver is an agreement between the state board of education and local school systems that grants school districts maximum flexibility allowing them to establish their own guidelines for areas such class sizes, promotion and retention criteria, and teacher pay. The strategic waiver exchanges greater accountability for increased student achievement. As a result, local school districts are permitted to develop innovative instructional programs. Williams County Schools has developed its own unique academic content standards, testing program, and school evaluation system.

Case overview. Stanton Middle School (SMS) is a suburban Title I middle school within the Williams County School district. Stanton Middle School emanates with the pride of the surrounding community. Named after a beloved schoolteacher from the community, SMS has educated countless families who have remained as the community has grown. Upon walking into the school one begins to understand the importance the school has played in the development of the community. Banners displaying the names of community partners are hung proudly in the atrium. Trophy cases filled with both athletic and academic trophies display the hard work, effort, and persistence of Stanton's students and teachers. Pictures of past teachers of the year hang neatly reflecting the school's diverse teaching staff and dedication to academic excellence.

Stanton Middle School's student population is comprised primarily of students of color. Black students (including students from Africa and Latin America) comprise more than 70% of the student population, followed by Hispanic, White, Multi-racial, Asian, and American Indian students. Nearly 10% of students are English-language learners and students with disabilities

make up roughly 15%. Stanton Middle School's CCRPI scores for 2018 and 2019 were in the high 70s above the state average for each year, respectively. The school's CCRPI scores have gradually increased each year.

In recent years, the SMS faculty and staff has undergone change. The changes to the school's administration and faculty can be attributed to annual turnover and retirements. It can also be attributed to a test cheating scandal resulting in the entire administrative team being replaced along with several teachers. Seventy teachers, from a variety of backgrounds, provide instruction to more than 1,300 students in grades 6-8.

Stanton Middle School was chosen as the research site it is a representation of the middle schools within WCS. The school was also chosen because it is a suburban school. A search of the literature shows that research involving suburban schools usually focuses on issues of resegregation and its consequences (Rotberg, 2020; Jones, 2018; Frankenberg, 2012). Not issues concerning testing, instructional practice, or academic achievement. Stanton Middle School was also chosen because of its academic achievement. Suburban schools, in particular suburban Title I schools, are often perceived to be underperforming (Wiley, Shircliffe, & Morley, 2012). However, SMS's levels of academic achievement, as measured by the CCRPI, have improved overtime contradicting the perception that suburban Title I schools are underperforming.

Participants. Purposeful sampling was used to identify the appropriate participants for the study (Patton, 2015). Criteria were established and used to select individuals to be interviewed or sites to be investigated. While there were many teachers who worked at SMS, not all teachers met the criteria to participate in the study. The criteria used to identify participants in the sample were: (1) a middle school teacher in grades 6-8 and (2) an academic content teacher in the areas of math, ELA, science, and social studies.

Eleven math, ELA, reading, science, and social studies academic content teachers in grades 6-8 at SMS participated in the study. Teachers were interviewed about their knowledge of Georgia's ESSA Plan, testing requirements outlined in the Georgia ESSA plan, how annual state testing affected their instructional practice, changes to instructional practice since the implementation of the ESSA, and support from school leaders in the sensemaking and implementation of the ESSA. Stanton Middle School's principal and one of the school's four assistant principals participated in an interview. The interview addressed how school leaders supported teachers (e.g., strategies, trainings) as they made sense of and implemented the ESSA as it relates to how annual testing requirements affect instructional practice.

Data Collection

Instrumentation

Eleven math, ELA, reading, science, and social studies academic content teachers in grades 6-8 and two school leaders from SMS provided the data for the study.

Interviews. Interviews were conducted using semi-structured interviews. This interview style, as described by Roulston (2010), allows the interviewer to use a prepared interview protocol with open-ended questions to facilitate the discussion between the interviewer and interviewee. The questions on the protocol do not need to be asked in order. The interviewer can also pose follow-up questions based upon the interviewee's responses. The conversation between the interviewer and interviewee are fluid and conversational. Additionally, Dilley (2000) posited that using interview protocols are "a guide to the journey we want our respondents to take. They serve as a path we suggest for them to point out landmarks and markers they think are important for us to understand and map the journey" (p. 133). Thus, the journey of school leaders and teachers as they made sense of and implemented the annual test requirements under Georgia's

ESSA plan, by way of their instructional practice, was one that had to be considered. In order to understand the perspectives of the participants, it is important to have thoughtful questions prepared. The benefit of this approach is that improves the comprehensiveness of data collection, allowing for a systematic or methodical approach to data collection. Conversely, the weakness in this approach is a lack of flexibility and important topics can be inadvertently omitted. Moreover, if the interviewer does not use consistent wording when interviewing participants, responses can vary widely resulting in different perspectives and array of answers with little to no comparability.

Procedures

Before recruiting teacher participants, I met with SMS's principal. During the meeting, I provided the principal with an overview of the study, discussed the teacher recruitment strategy, how data would be collected, and provided the principal with a copy of the consent form, (see Appendix A for a copy of the consent form). Once the principal granted permission to conduct study, recruitment of school leaders (e.g., assistant principals) and academic content teachers began. Teachers were contacted via email inviting them to participate in the study. In the email, teachers were provided with information about the study, the level of participation, and information about an receiving an incentive to participate, (see Appendix B for a copy of the recruitment letter). School leaders received a similar email inviting them to participate in the study.

The school principal, one assistant principal, and 11 teachers from various content areas across grade levels responded to the invitation to participate in the study and were interviewed. Interviews were conducted via Google Meet and over the phone, from April through June 2020 and were recorded using a recording device. Prior to beginning the interviews, the consent letter

was reviewed with each participant and consent to participate was obtained. I used an interview protocol to facilitate the conversation, (see Appendix C for a copy of the teacher interview guide; see Appendix D for a copy of the school leader interview guide). The teacher interview was comprised of three parts. I explained each component of the interview to each participant prior to beginning the interview. The three parts of the interview were: (1) demographic information about the teacher including information about the students that they taught during the current school year (e.g., students with disabilities, general education); (2) teachers knowledge of Georgia's ESSA Plan, testing requirements specified in the plan as well as the influence of testing on their instruction; and (3) the support they received from school leaders as they prepared instruction. School leaders interviews contained two portions. The first portion of the interview included demographic information about the participant. The second portion of the interview was about the support they provided teachers as they planned instruction. The school leaders who were interviewed were informed of the format of the interview prior to starting. The use of a semi-structured interview format allowed for the conversation between the interviewee and myself to unfold organically. Given the participants responses, follow-up questions were asked to probe for deeper understanding and clarification. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to one hour. At the conclusion of the interviews, participants were asked if they could be contacted for a follow-up interview. I also informed the participants that I would be forwarding a copy of the transcript of the completed interview for their review for member checking. A $5 gift card to Starbucks was sent to each participant via email once the interview was complete.

Tables 2 and 3 provide contextual information about the school leader and teacher study participants. Table 2, School Leader Participants, shows the demographic information for the

school leaders who participated in the study. Demographic information includes the school leader's age, race, ethnicity, years of experience in their current position.

Table 2

School Leader Participants

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Position	Years of Experience as a School Leader	Years at SMS
Sandra	F	50	Black	Principal	10	1
Renee	F	54	Black	Assistant Principal	14	6

Table 3, Teacher Participants, shows the demographic information for the teachers that participated in the study. Demographic information includes the teacher's age, race, ethnicity, years of teaching experience, as well as information about the grade level and content area taught during the 2019-2020 school year. Information about each teachers' student population was also included.

Table 3

Teacher Participants

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Years of Experience	Grade Level	Content Area	Student Population	Years at SMS
Richard	M	38	White	5	8	Social Studies	GE, G	5
Jessica	F	29	White	6	6	Science	GE, G	2
Linda	F	53	White	20	6	ELA	GE, ELL	1
Stacy	F	29	White	1	7	Science	GE, SPED	1
Dawn	F	45	Black	21	8	Math	GE, ELL	2
Stephanie	F	25	White	3	8	ELA	GE, SPED	1
Lindsay	F	46	Black	23	6	Math	GE, G	1
Jackie	F	39	Black	14	6	Social Studies	GE	1
Beverly	F	63	Black	20	8	ELA	GE, G	10
Robin	F	45	Black	11	8	Science	GE, SPED	1
Raquel	F	47	Black	20	8	ELA	GE, ELL	1

Note. General Education (GE), Gifted (G), English Language Learners (ELL), and Special Education (SPED)

Data Analysis

The aim of case study data analysis is to synthesize and integrate the data to tell a clear story of the case under study (Patton, 2015). Data analysis began by transcribing the interviews and coding them for the development themes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The coding of the interview data allows the researcher to transform raw data into chucks of text or data that address the research questions under investigation (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Coding and development of themes was aided by the use of qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12. Themes represent overarching, reoccurring patterns or responses in the interview data (Patton, 2015). Once the interview transcripts were uploaded into NVivo, they were closely examined. Nodes or themes were developed and organized upon reviewing the transcripts. Key texts from the transcripts were identified, organized, and coded by node. The data was also analyzed using deductive and inductive analysis (Patton, 2015). Deductive analysis determines whether the data supports prior generalizations, theories, or concepts. Inductive analysis generates new concepts, findings, or theories from the data.

The study employed a holistic case study approach where the data were analyzed across the entire entity. More specifically, the data from the teachers and school leaders were analyzed together. I used within-case analysis to analyze the data. Within-case analysis allows the researcher to "describe, understand, and explain what has happened in a single, bounded context—the "case" or site" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 100). The data from each teacher was analyzed for overlapping and differing responses. The data from the school leaders were compared to the responses from the teachers' interviews. Together, the data was synthesized and integrated together to tells a cohesive and coherent story about a suburban middle school's teachers' sensemaking of Georgia's ESSA Plan end-of-grade assessments as well as the support

they received from school leaders as they implemented the plan as demonstrated by their instructional practice.

Qualitative Data Quality

The quality of the qualitative data was assessed in a three-fold process. This is important to establish the trustworthiness of the data. First, the interview questions were piloted prior to being administered in an actual interview setting. This ensured that the interview questions flowed in a logical order, addressed the aim of the research questions, and were appropriately worded. Next, I assessed the quality of the interview transcript. For example, I considered whether the transcripts were transcribed verbatim, alterations to the data, and the use of transcription systems (Poland, 1995). Lastly, completed interview transcripts were emailed to the interviewees for member-checking (Merriam, 2002). Member-checking allows the interviewee to review the transcripts for accuracy. The teachers were also asked if they would like to clarify or further explain any other their statements.

Subjectivity Statement

Peshkin (1988) maintained that subjectivity is the intersection where the researcher's "self and subject [become] joined" (p. 17). For me, my experiences as a practicing middle school teacher in a non-tested academic content area may have traversed into my research, potentially allowing my biases to influence my interpretation of the data. Each my subjective "I's" (Peshkin, 1988, p. 18) are explicated below.

Educator. When asked (and sometimes when not asked), I proudly boast that I am a middle school educator. I have dedicated almost 15 years of my life guiding, shaping, encouraging, and educating young lives. Taking that experience into consideration, I often have to confront my beliefs about the qualities of a good school and the approaches taken by schools

to educate students. I have worked at schools that were well organized, run efficiently, and provided a nurturing environment. I have also worked at schools that were quite the opposite. My training, education, and professional experience have contributed to my beliefs about schools; beliefs that I project onto schools that I encounter. Those beliefs include the role of school leadership, effective instructional practices, as well as the role of public schools and education in society. For the purposes of this study, it was very important that I work through my beliefs about the role of education policy and how it influences teachers' instructional practice every day.

Limitations

Stanton Middle School was the only school under investigation for this study. Consequently, SMS may not be representative of other suburban schools, in particular suburban Title I schools, making it difficult to generalize the results. Also, while the ESSA requires each state to develop and implement its own distinct plan, the ESSA plan created and developed by Georgia stakeholders may make it difficult to replicate the study to understand how their own state's ESSA plan effects teachers' instructional practice. For example, the types and frequency of testing requirements may differ from Georgia's.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of testing requirements specified in Georgia's ESSA Plan on teachers' instructional practice as they made sense of the policy. Additionally, the study investigated the support given to teachers by school leaders as they planned instruction that aligned with end-of-grade assessments as part of the Georgia Milestones Assessment System that is specified in Georgia's Every Student Succeeds Act Plan. The research questions guiding the study were: (1) How do suburban Georgia middle grades teachers' sensemaking of the Georgia Every Student Succeeds Act Plan End-of-Grade assessment requirements affect their instructional practice? and (2) How do suburban Georgia middle grades school leaders support teachers' instructional practice as they implement annual assessment requirements under the Georgia Every Student Succeeds Act Plan?

As demonstrated in the literature, the introduction of high-stakes testing under NCLB not only shifted the instructional practice of teachers, but it also changed the amount and types of courses offered to students. The implementation of the ESSA, NCLB's successor, reduced the number of high-stakes tests administered to students, especially in grades six and seven. Thus, the aim of this study was to investigate how this change in policy, or the changes in testing requirements, influenced teachers' instructional practice. The data collected during the study, from both teachers and school leaders, provided insight into the effect of education policy on teachers' instructional practice. From the semi-structured interviews employed during this study, three primary themes emerged from the data. Those themes are: (1) practice over policy; (2) testing drives teachers' instructional practice; and (3) expectations from the district take precedence over expectations from the state. While the themes primarily reflected the viewpoints

of teachers at SMS, interwoven within those themes are SMS school leaders' perspectives. Together, the perspectives of the teachers' and school leaders' illustrates the implementation of testing policy as it is understood by teachers with the support of school leaders. The explication of those themes are described below.

Practice Over Policy

Before learning about how teachers make sense of Georgia's ESSA Plan, interview questions were posed to the participants about what they knew about the plan, testing requirements outlined in the plan (referred to as the GMAS), and how they learned about the plan. Responses varied from having little to no knowledge, being somewhat familiar with the plan, to being very knowledgeable. For example, Stacy and Stephanie, who are both in the early stages of their teaching careers ceded their limited knowledge. Stacy, a 7th grade science teacher in her first year as a teacher exclaimed, "I know you can get fired if you do wrong." Stephanie, an 8th grade ELA teacher stated, "I don't think I know anything. I didn't even know No Child Left Behind was no longer existing. I didn't know it was replaced. So, I don't think I know much about it at all."

Some responses even referenced that Georgia's ESSA Plan replaced NCLB. However, specific details about how or what was replaced were not discussed. What was present was how the law is embedded in their practice, more specifically in terms of the Georgia Milestone Assessment System assessments. Richard, an 8th grade social studies teacher, discussed his experience:

> My only interaction with the DOE is almost exclusively towards the milestones and as a teacher we have to administer it. I remember sitting in meetings as they discussed how the test is going to be administered, how they were going to it, teachers switching rooms,

> and all of the rigmarole to get it implemented. So, my only real understanding of the act is how it affects me.

Jessica, a 6th grade science teacher, expressed a similar viewpoint. She stated, "I know from faculty meetings, … [the] practicing those procedures." Furthermore, teachers were familiar with the frequency of testing and the consequences for students who did not earn a score at or above the minimum passing score.

When asked about her knowledge of Georgia's ESSA Plan, Linda, a veteran 6th grade ELA teacher, commented:

> Grades three, five, and eight are testing years. In those three years, children must pass their milestones to be promoted. In grades four, six, and seven, they take math, language arts, and the promotion is not as stringent.

In spite of the majority of teachers' having little to no knowledge of the plan, there was one teacher who was very familiar with Georgia's ESSA Plan. Not only was the teacher well versed in the plan, but she also participated in the crafting of Georgia's plan when she worked for a private education company. During our interview Robin described her experience:

> Well, I learned everything about the Every Student Succeeds Act when I worked for a private education company …. [Do] you remember the regional meeting that they had in-regards-to the Every Student Succeeds Act and they had community input in-regards-to what it looked like? I participated in three or four of the regional meetings to help not only listen to what the stakeholders wanted.

Robin's experience in corporate America before returning to the classroom provided her a window into the development of the plan. From the various responses from teachers, having knowledge of the law in general was not as important as understanding how it affected their

work. However, they did not discount the importance of being knowledgeable of education policy. In fact, several teachers stated that educators should be aware of education policies and suggested that they should pay more attention to the information they received from Georgia's teacher advocacy organizations—the Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE) and the Georgia Association of Educators (GAE).

When asked about their knowledge of Georgia's ESSA Plan, both Sandra and Renee expressed that their knowledge of the plan was limited. Sandra, SMS's principal connected the ESSA with NCLB recognizing that the ESSA was NCLB's successor. She also explained that she does not discuss education policy, such as the ESSA, with her staff unless it something provided by the district office. She explained:

> I usually just take whatever it is that the district gives us and I use whatever we get from the district to share with the teachers. So, I don't really talk a lot about policy and I don't really talk a lot about the laws. I've talked more about our procedures in our school, the policies that we have at our school, but not those from the federal government … So, the big policies, things like special ed, I make sure that those policies are done through our special education teachers. That they have a clear understanding.

Hence, as the instructional leader of the school, Sandra's chief concern is the instruction occurring in her school. Education policies were important as they shaped the work of the teachers in her school, but she regarded the implementation of these policies as carried out in the day-to-day work of teachers more important.

Renee, an assistant principal, the science content administrator, and the school's testing coordinator, had a similar take on the emphasis on policy indicating that "maybe 20 percent" of time throughout the school year was directed at policy. That emphasis was mainly concentrated

on testing and administering the GMAS. Renee did reference the education policy-based training that all teachers are required to complete at the beginning of the school year. Those trainings include topic such as testing, sexual harassment, and being a mandated reporter.

Although there were no trainings provided on Georgia's ESSA Plan or assessment requirements, both Sandra and Renee acknowledged their role in supporting teachers' acquisition and sensemaking of education policies such as Georgia's ESSA Plan as well as the assessment requirements specified in the plan that influenced the instructional practice of teachers at SMS. Moreover, both leaders acknowledged the limited amount of time spent during planning meetings and other shared meeting times discussing policy-based matters.

From the interviews, it was evident both teachers' and school leaders' knowledge of the Georgia's ESSA Plan varied from having little to no knowledge, being somewhat familiar with the plan, to being very knowledgeable. For example, some teachers knew that the ESSA replaced No Child Left Behind. What was understood about Georgia's ESSA Plan was the end-of-grade and end-of-course assessment administered as part of the Georgia Milestone Assessment System. Teachers expressed that they were familiar with the procedures to administer GMAS assessments, knowing which grade levels and content areas were tested, as well as the promotion requirements associated with passing the test. Moreover, school leaders' knowledge of Georgia's ESSA Plan was also limited. Minimal time was dedicated to teachers learning about or acquiring knowledge about federal or state education policies. The education policies that were school-specific policies and policies such as special education that are monitored closely for compliance.

It was evident that the focus education policy was more about practice than policy. Meaning that while policies provided the framework, how it was executed or played out in the

classroom was the primary concern. This included special education and discipline policies and procedures. In terms of the testing as a component of Georgia's ESSA Plan, the GMAS assessments were best understood by teachers and school leaders in terms of the policies and procedures to administer the tests with fidelity according to state and district policies. Training was provided to ensure that all teachers are aware of their role and the consequences if the protocol is not followed. Thus, resulting in a disconnect between the connection of the influence of GMAS assessments on teachers' instructional practice—the focus of this study.

Testing Drives Teachers' Instructional Practice

Testing, in the form of both district-level testing and the state-level GMAS assessments, was at the forefront of instructional planning and the selection of instructional practices and strategies. State-level testing included both end-of-grade and end-of course assessments. Although end-of-course testing was not the focus of this study, it was learned that 8th grade students take EOCs in math and science because they are enrolled in 9th grade courses; a district initiative.

The emphasis on testing spanned all three grade levels and all content areas. Testing effected every stage of instruction, from planning to execution. Raquel, a veteran 8th grade ELA teacher, described how GMAS testing flowed through her instruction and classroom. Raquel stated:

> First of all, I look back at where and how my students scored on their previous year on their GMAS. Mind you, you're going to be comparing apples to oranges because you have kids in let's say 7th grade that have moved onto 8th grade. So, I look at the scores from the last time and then I try to create some type of goal that we work towards using the scores from the previous year. And then, so I keep that in the back of my mind, every

> single time I'm planning any type of instruction with the kids. So, testing is sort of life. Yes, it happens at the end of the school year. The GMAS in particular happens at the end. However, testing as a whole is continuous within the classroom. And it's used to determine what I'm going to do for enrichment or remediation with my kids basically. So, it's used quite a bit to plan the curriculum that the kids are given.

While testing occurred at distinct points of time in Raquel's classroom, the influence of state-level testing permeated her instruction and guided her approach to teaching and learning. Stephanie, Raquel's 8th grade ELA colleague, indicated that testing had a great influence on her classroom. During our interview, Stephanie described that influence explicating:

> So, the testing requirements completely change how I run my classroom to be honest. The types of lessons I prepare and the types of skills I give the kids. If I had free reign of my classroom, I would do things very differently…. but if I did not have to focus on the test I would probably never teach multiple choice.

Stephanie's instruction focused a lot on test preparation and providing students with the necessary skills to be successful on tests.

Beverly, another veteran 8th ELA teacher, expressed many of the frustrations shared by Stephanie. She even went a step further commenting on how testing has driven instruction in ELA to become very prescriptive. With exasperation in her voice, Beverly said "It's gotten so prescriptive and it has gotten progressively more each year… So, it's like teaching to the test and they think they have all of the answers and every teacher should teach this way."

Thinking about her 6th grade ELA classroom, Linda explained:

> I used the metaphor of a driving test. I think of instruction, what we would like for it to be is the actual practice for the driver's license test. When you drive around and you have

> real experiences of things happening, that's what we wish we only had to do. But the reality is there is a paper and pencil test. So, at some point you [have to] learn what a kangaroo sign is. Are you ever going to see a kangaroo? No. But if you have the kangaroo sign on your test, do you have to be able to get the correct answer? Yes. So, that I think that plays into my instructional practice.

For Linda, like Stephanie, instruction that was focused with the test in mind was about strategy. Teachers must do their best to prepare students for all possible options, even if they seem unrealistic.

At SMS, all 8th grade students are enrolled in 9th grade physical science. A course that has an EOC rather than an EOG. Robin provided an 8th grade science teacher's perspective of testing's impact on instruction stating, "Oh, it affects everything. We say begin with the end in mind." Indicating that her choices in planning were heavily influenced by her students' ability to do well on the EOC. Robin further explained:

> And the end, of course, is whether or not those students are proficient on that test, in my opinion. So absolutely the way that I go about teaching in the classroom, the different phenomena I put in front of students, …, just basically determining what the students understand and where are the gaps in order to fill those so they can be successful on the test. So, it drives everything. Unfortunately, that's our reality right now.

For teachers of non-EOG or EOC courses (e.g., 6th and 7th grade science and social studies), there was some relief. When speaking about her experience as a 6th grade science teacher Jessica stated, "Part of me is happy to teach science because some of that pressure is not put on us." However, she discussed how having a lack of an EOG negatively impacted her

instruction due to students not being motivated. “So that’s another thing I don’t agree with,” she exclaimed. She further shared:

> Math and language arts are held to a much higher expectation than social studies and science. Even though all four content areas should be equal in my opinion. But because students are made aware that they’re taking math and language arts [EOGs], they tend to be more relaxed with social studies and science and that influences my teaching. I don’t want to tell them science is not important.

Moreover, though these teachers were not subject to some of the pressures testing had on their instruction compared to their colleagues in state-level GMAS tested subjects, district-level testing strongly influenced their instruction. While Jessica felt relieved from the pressures of state-level GMAS testing, she did communicate her frustration with district-level testing and how it affected her instruction. She explained, “I think the county wants us to teach to the test.” Jackie’s comments similarly reflected Jessica’s feeling about the influence of district testing. She replied, “Even though it may not be pressure because there is no milestones at the end the year, there’s always pressure because of the test given by the district. Because you want the students to be successful.”

When faced with the reality that students are required to be assessed by the GMAS and even district tests, teachers much ensure that their instructional practice is aligned with standards and be relevant and rigorous. In a broad sense, how teachers made sense of testing—both GMAS assessments and district-level—did influence their instructional practice. However, the interviews revealed more explicitly what those influences were. I discuss how testing effects teachers’ instructional time next.

Testing’s Effect on Instructional Time

Not only did testing influence teachers' instructional practice in general it also effected instructional time and how it was used. Richard echoed the issues of timing and making sure that there was enough time to teach all of the required standards before the test. He described how he and the other 8th grade social studies teachers felt last school year as they prepared for the GMAS. He stated:

> It influences our calendar. [The] GMAS is usually given at the end of April. So, that means that we have to be done with the 18 weeks of instruction in about 12 weeks. So, we really sort of rushed through lots of materials second semester specifically because we just have to. It's not fair to them to give them a test and have them answer questions that they have never experienced … Last year we gave our GMAS the Tuesday after spring break, and like surprise, surprise, they didn't do great on it.

As a math teacher, Dawn expressed concern and frustration with both testing and time. Although she was an 8th grade math teacher, all of her students were enrolled in 9th grade Algebra; a district initiative. Consequently, the students had not been exposed to the traditional 8th grade math curriculum. She indicated that she struggled with balancing teaching her students the 9th grade Algebra curriculum while building and scaffolding skills from the traditional 8th grade math curriculum. Dawn explained:

> I think this year I was teaching to the test a little bit. I had to figure it out. So, some of the stuff I may not be able to teach you because it's not going to be assessed on the test. I need to make sure that I not only expose you but that you've mastered it. That is why it took so long because then I have to scaffold and I have to figure out how I am going to get you 6th, 7th, and 8th grade stuff in an hour and then the last 20 minutes get you the stuff that I should be teaching you.

Lindsay, a 6th grade math teacher with 23 years of experiences who taught general education and gifted students, expressed similar concerns to Dawn. General education students were taught the traditional 6th grade math curriculum outlined in the Georgia Standards of Excellence (GSE). Students in her gifted classes, which includes gifted and high-achieving general education students, were taught an accelerated curriculum. The accelerated curriculum was a fast-paced combination of some units of the traditional 6th grade math curriculum and some units of the traditional 7th grade math curriculum. Lindsay stated that she had "never taught to the test per se," but she frequently had to review with all of her students, especially her gifted students. She explained, "What I find is that I have to go back and review more with them. Normally more than my [general education] students … because they are a year ahead or whatever, but they are being tested on their grade-level equivalent as opposed to whatever math level they are on." Although, the way courses were structured are outside of the control of teachers such as Dawn and Lindsay who teach students a form of accelerated curriculum, the pressure to ensure that students are prepared for their respective EOC or EOG was being felt. Their approaches to instruction are focused on both test preparation and filling in the gaps in learning.

Linda, while also feeling the pressures of time constraints in the classroom eluded to the amount of time she spent talking with her 6th grade students about preparing for the GMAS. It was something that she thought was important considering that her students were new to the middle school environment. Additionally, she wanted her students to understand the stress and pressures students may feel considering that there are punitive consequences for not passing the GMAS end-of-grade assessments at the end of the year—consequences such as being required to attend summer school or grade retention. Linda felt that these were serious consequences for the students to be aware of even if they were not in the critical testing years that occur in grades

three, five, and eight. She referenced one particular student she taught this year. A student who Linda worked with very hard in class but still struggled academically. She said:

> I talk about the tests every day because [she's] the one who is trying to use that test to prove her worth. I've got to get her to do well on the test. Not for me, not for her necessarily, but that number means more to her, more than she realizes, more than her parent realizes. So, I owe it her to get her number to be a true representation of her.

Hence, the effect of testing on teachers' instructional time was varied. Instructional time was not only used for focused test preparation, as in Linda's case, but as Richard, Lindsay, and Dawn expressed it effected the pace of their instruction. From scaffolding and filling in learning gaps to having enough time to teach the standards that will be assessed on the GMAS assessments, the teachers likened the race to the testing finish line at the end of the school year to a mad dash.

Instructional Planning Focused on the Test

Math, ELA, science and social studies teachers were required to meet two days out of the week for 75 minutes each day to plan their instruction, and review data from classroom assessments as well as required district assessments. There were three district-level tests administered each semester. The pre-test was given during the first week of the semester. It provided data on students' current knowledge of standards taught during the upcoming semester. The interim was a mid-term assessment given in the middle of the semester. It assessed student's acquisition of the standards during the first nine-weeks of the semester. The final is given at the conclusion of the semester. It measured students' knowledge of the standards for the entire semester. It was the exact same test as the pre-test. The results from the pre-test and final were measured to evaluate students' growth over the course of the semester. In addition to the time spent during required in-school planning meetings, all 11 teachers indicated that they spent many

hours outside of school planning classroom instruction. Linda described her planning in terms of a ratio, “I would say it’s probably three-to-one. I’ve probably put in three hours of prep time for every hour of class.” Stephanie calculated that planning for instruction was an additional five hours per week stating:

> You plan more than you actually teach…If we’re talking about planning and not just like I’m planning my lesson and I’m not gathering my resources and I’m not fixing my PowerPoint and dealing with technical issues.

Both Beverly and Maxine discussed spending their Sunday evening planning and preparing for the week.

“Seven, eight, nine, yeah nine hours in a week” figured Richard. Jackie , a 6th grade social studies teacher described her additional planning as such:

> Sometimes I’ll be sleeping in the night and I’ll wake up and [I will think], “Ooh, I could use this.” It could be that moment. Or, it could be 10 minutes before I started class. And I changed my entire lesson because I thought of something different. But a lot of times, you know, you put things on paper and you will plan. I spend maybe two hours on a Saturday, two hours on a Sunday. But then again, it’s more than the reality off paper, because I’m constantly changing and constantly editing, my presentation or what I’m going to teach because depending on how well my students are grasping the lesson that I’m teaching. I could change something in the middle of the lesson and say, “okay, let’s try something else.”

Robin, who said that she sometimes planned for three hours a day, also mentioned coming up with lesson ideas in her sleep. “I was even to the point where I, sometimes I would be dreaming about the lessons, what I should be doing,” explained Robin.

The use of the gradual release model of instruction was a district initiative used by content teachers in all three grade levels. The gradual release model of instruction had several formats. However, the format most used at SMS began with a teacher-centered mini-lesson for 10 to 20 minutes followed by student practice as students work on task to reinforce the lesson. The student work was completed individually or in groups. Teachers were also encouraged to use common lesson plans— a schoolwide initiative. The purpose of using the gradual release model of instruction and common lesson plans was to ensure educational equity. Thus, providing all students will quality instruction that ensures that all students are prepared for the GMAS as well as district assessments. In spite of the fact that both are instructional expectations focused on raising student achievement as measured by the GMAS and district assessments, the teachers interviewed had mixed feelings about employing the gradual release model and common assessments in their classrooms.

Richard expressed that both were not conducive to the way he runs his classroom, arguing "It doesn't work. I don't think for the efficacy of education. I don't think it works in a lot of ways …think about another teacher. She may have a bunch of [English language learners] or may have a different teaching style." Beverly, who had already expressed her frustrations that ELA instruction had become increasingly more prescriptive each year, was also not keen on the use of SMS's form of the gradual release instructional strategy as well as the use of common lesson plans. "Gradual release is something that we have to do, we talk about it in meetings, and I've had words with my administrators about it too," stated Beverly. She went onto to say that although they planned as an 8th grade ELA content group, she still went to her classroom, closed her door and taught in a way that she knew was best for her students. For example, she referenced the teaching of vocabulary that students may encounter on the GMAS. "It's

something that I do, but they don't want me to teach it. So, I find creative ways of getting my kids to do some kind of vocabulary study," she explained. However, not all teachers were not opposed to the idea. As a first-year teacher, Stacy was dependent on the instructional model and found her footing. She stated, "We were all new except for [Ms.] Jones. So, Jones [said], 'let's do X, Y, and Z'…And we were like, 'let's do this.' Our [lessons] were always the same and we took turns making lessons and everyone used them." The support of her colleagues was important to her ability to successfully to transition into a full-time teaching position.

Nearly all of the teachers interviewed referenced the instructional resources provided by the district that where useful in planning instruction and test preparation. All content areas were provided with instructional frameworks by unit that identified the standards to be taught, a brief overview of the unit, learning objectives and targets, key vocabulary terms, common misconceptions, district-level test blueprints, and sample assessment items. The resources also included instructional coaches who visited teachers periodically during their planning days to assist teachers as they planned their instruction and classroom assessments. All teachers also indicated that they had attended at least one district-provided training or bootcamp designed to provide lesson planning ideas and instructional resources. Some teachers, such as Jackie, found these resources to be helpful to their instruction. Speaking about the district's provided social studies resources she exclaimed:

> All I can say is that we have an abundance of resources. There's so many resources that I get lost amongst the resources. I get so comfortable with one particular resource and I [decide that] I may need to change it up a bit.

Raquel also praised the district's provided instructional resources citing the availability of texts and reading passages that the ELA teachers could choose from. Likewise, school leaders touted

the availability of resources provided by the district. Renee proudly boasted about a conversation she had with a teacher who was new to the district. In her conversation with the teacher about the teaching materials provided by the district the teacher said, "I've taught in North Carolina. I've taught in Texas. And she [said] the resources here are unbelievable. I've never been to a district where they had an instructional resource portal. It is just full of resources." The availability of instructional resources found on the district's website were important and meaningful for those teachers who incorporated them into their classroom instruction. Nevertheless, there were some teachers who were not as excited about the types of resources provided.

Some teachers indicated that the district's instructional resources were not aligned to the standards or the standards were overly prescriptive not providing teacher autonomy; several teachers expressed the lack of autonomy when required to implement the gradual release model of teaching and common lesson plans. Linda was very clear in expressing her frustration with the 6th grade ELA instructional materials and the lack of alignment with state standards that would be assessed on the GMAS. Her frustration was based on several years of experience as an ELA teacher in a few districts across the state. She explained:

> Lucy Calkins is the curriculum that language arts teachers use… I was at a state meeting this summer about writing and changes to the writing test. [The presenter] said there are programs out there, one's named after famous people that do not align with our state standards. Doesn't mean that the program is bad, but the written script does not meet our standards. It's the program we have. We use the script … It doesn't teach. Forty-percent of our test is left out and there's no way we compensate back…40% of our material that's on the test is not covered in our curriculum. Don't understand it. Never seen it in my whole career.

Linda also described her interaction with the district ELA instructional coach during a planning meeting. A conversation about how the particular standard should be taught left her frustrated as though her years of experience were irrelevant. She explained:

> I know [that] I'm not crazy, but you start to think [that] you're crazy. Maybe I don't know what I'm talking about. Maybe this is not the standards I should be teaching…I know what I'm doing. I've been successful in this and it shouldn't be where you have to keep your mind and yourself. I have been to tears.

Linda's comments aligned with the remarks articulated earlier by Beverly when she said that ELA instruction had become so prescriptive. Both Linda's and Beverly's dissatisfaction with the curriculum was directed towards feeling powerless to help their students be successful on the GMAS ELA EOG—an EOG that was consequential for students.

Stacy felt pressured by the administration to use the district's instructional materials. Referring to the administration's push for the use of district materials, Stacy yielded, "[Renee] made us do it. We had to do everything from the district portal first before we were allowed to make anything." She also voiced her irritation with having to modify district materials in order to make them suitable for her students saying, "So what we did was we took the district's lesson and then we bent it seven ways to Sunday to make it work because a lot of those lessons weren't geared towards our students." Recognizing that all students are unique and students in Title I schools face challenges students in non-Title I schools may not experience, Stacy and her colleagues worked diligently to adapt the district's lessons and resources to their classrooms.

Lindsay felt defeated and even declared, "I guess they don't respect my experiences or my achievements. They don't respect me as a teacher. They think I don't know what I'm doing." Across the grade level, 6th grade students were not performing well in math including coming in

last place of all middle schools in the district. Hence, the pressure was on to raise student achievement. When asked about how testing impacted her instruction, she admitted that all of the 6th grade math teachers had to use the district's materials and not just the ones provided on the district portal. She said, "It got to a point this year that the [instructional coach] wrote our lesson plans and said this is what you need to do." The 6th grade math team's common assessments, or end-of-unit tests, that were usually school-based tests made by them were made by the district office, " All 11 were district issued" explained Lindsay. She also described when she was reprimanded for their use of district materials:

> The district instructional coach came in my room to observe what we were doing and [Sandra] came back and said that those were questions off of the test. And I said, no, those were the exemplars that they gave us in the unit plan. She said that we can't use them because those are the same questions that were on the test. So, you know, damned if you do and damned if you don't.

Instructional practice centered around standards-based instruction that is assessed at the state, and even district level, encompassed vast amounts of time outside of the instructional time spent in the classroom with students. Instructional planning as the heartbeat of what occurred in the classroom.

While the implementation of the gradual release model of teaching and common lesson plans across all grade levels and contents are the expectations of SMS's administration, teachers were mixed about employing these instructional practices in their classrooms. Moreover, the use of district resources to guide instruction also varied with some teachers expressing that the resources were not aligned to with the curriculum that was assessed on the GMAS assessments. Teachers at SMS spent a lot of their own personal time planning for instruction. With testing

district-level and GMAS assessments in mind, teachers were driven to not only plan lessons for their classroom, but also plan lessons and activities with the specific goal of preparing students for testing. Next, I discuss how SMS teachers planned and used instructional materials that were similar to assessment items students might encounter on an EOG, EOC, or district-level testing.

Planning and Using Instructional Activities That Mirror the Test

During the interviews, teachers expressed that much of the time they spent planning outside of their required school planning days on Mondays and Thursdays was dedicated to locating and reviewing instructional resources. Additionally, they spent time finding or developing resources and activities that mirrored what students might encounter on the GMAS or district-level testing. Several teacher even referenced using sample test questions and question stems from both GMAS test preparation resources found on the Georgia Department of Education website as well as from other states across the country. When adding to her mathematics instructional toolkit, Lindsay pulled from instructional resources in New York, Arizona, New Jersey, and Utah. While these resources are vital to her instructional practice in preparing students for testing, she noted how time consuming it is. “It’s a matter of digging through them and wrapping my head around it.” She further explained, “And I kind of believe that’s the reason why it takes me so long to plan, because I feel that I have to understand it before trying to go out there and teach it to students.” Even having years of experience and instructional materials and resources from previous year, Lindsay nevertheless spent her time finding and locating instructional resources to prepare her students for the GMAS assessments and district-level testing.

When teaching her poetry unit, Beverly described how she modeled her instruction to help students to prepare for testing:

> You have to teach them a strategy to help them to understand the text that they're reading. So, take for example poetry. Poetry can be so complex and some my kids will say they hate poetry because they don't understand it. Well, I have to teach them just what to look for. And I would have to break it apart, analyzing sometimes line by line.

Stephanie also indicated that GMAS testing shaped her classroom activities as she prepared her students for testing. She explained:

> It does depending on the standard that I'm teaching or they type of activity that we are doing. It will also determine how I group them. So, we deconstruct the text and we deconstruct the question. If it's a multiple-choice question, here's the question. Where do we find that in the text? Where do we see each answer choice? Okay, how do I rule out this answer choice? While I do like them to do that individually, what I find is that they make a lot of mistakes. So, sometimes they're able to work as a group. They care about the answer choices.

Richard even explained how classroom tests were structured to prepare students for the GMAS. He stated:

> We try to make it look as similar to [the GMAS] as possible. Even to the point where we have started giving our assessments using the computer every time because they are required to take the GMAS on them. Now we do a little bit of other stuff, like we usually give them paper copies of the test if they want. One so they can take notes on and annotate it. They want to practice, but I'm trying to get them away from using paper copies just because I want them to be comfortable taking a test on a laptop, a Chromebook, or in a computer lab.

Linda also mentioned using instructional activities that reflect the GMAS. She justified the need to prepare students for the GMAS through instructional activities and classroom assessments. She described what that preparation looks like in her classroom:

> So, I think, again, in more logistical and syntactical ways. And especially in sixth grade they many have never seen it that way. Third grade they many have never done a bubble sheet before, so you do them a disservice. They could answer questions all day by writing it on a line. But, if you give them with multiple choice with bubble to fill in, you're not teaching them testing habits and logistics … If I give them a test anyway, if their milestone is online, then I should give this [test] online.

The fact that tests are administered online shifted teachers' instructional practice. Tests administered using pencil and paper were considered ineffective as they did little to prepare students for the district-level testing and the GMAS assessments that were administered online.

From the perspective of teachers at SMS, instructional planning with the test in mind was important, but so was using instructional materials that are similar to what students will encounter on the GMAS and district tests. The teachers believed that the more students were exposed to the structure of the assessments, in addition to the content, the more likely they were to be successful and earn a passing score. That success was even more important given that scores from GMAS EOC assessments accounted for 20% of students' final course grade. That is considered next.

GMAS Testing Not Only Impacts Instructions, but Also Students' Course Grades

For Dawn, testing not only guided instruction, but testing was also consequential as it impacted students' course grade. Thus, her instruction was intentional and focused. At SMS, 8th grade students were enrolled in 9th grade Algebra I, an end-of-course class where the EOC

administered at the end of each semester counts for 20% of a student's final grade. Dawn recounted how the alignment of her grade book often aligned with students' performance on the EOC assessment. Hence, indicating that her instruction was aligned with the expectations of the standards and the EOC. She stated:

> And there has to be a certain level of alignment with your grade book and you'll see it. I knew last year that I had that kind of moment where you're like I don't know if I'm even doing well. It was good to see that I have a child in my classroom and I they listen because based on their overall grade… it was in the development bracket. It was good. It was a good confirmation for when they performed on the EOC, even when they performed in the development bracket. And so, it showed me that there was some kind of alignment between my grade book. There were students with grades of 85, 90 meaning that were proficient or distinguished which is exactly how they performed on the EOC.

That alignment was important to Dawn given that her students had not been taught the traditional 8th grade math curriculum specified in the GSE. Consequentially, the way in which she built her instruction, using group work and differentiated instruction, was strategic. Being able to move students effectively and timely through the standards in preparation for testing was paramount for Dawn.

Teachers expressed the various ways testing affected their instructional practice. Testing caused instruction to be more focused in test-skills and strategies. It also resulted in a prescriptive instruction that limited teacher autonomy. Timing was also an issue as teachers found themselves racing to the finish line or having too much to teach and too little time to fit it in all of the standards before. Teachers' instructional planning focused on testing. Stanton Middle School teachers met two days out of the week to plan their instruction, and review data

from classroom assessments as well as required district assessments. School and district instructional initiatives, the gradual release model of instruction and common lessons, were met with mixed feelings as some teachers felt that these instructional models did not allow teachers the teach as they saw fit. Again, demonstrating a lack of teacher autonomy. Moreover, the instructional resources provided by the district were beneficial to teachers' planning an instruction. However, some teachers felt that the district provided resources were misaligned and not beneficial for instructional that prepared students for the GMAS assessments. To ensure that students were prepared, teachers presented students with instructional materials that mirrored or mimicked questions that they may encounter on the GMAS or district testing. That included structuring classroom tests and the testing environment to emulate the GMAS EOGs and EOCs. Lastly, testing not only impacted instruction, but also students' grades. Georgia Milestone assessments in math and science counted for 20% of students' final grade each semester.

Teachers at SMS spent a lot of their own personal time planning for instruction. With testing in mind, teachers were driven to plan lessons with the specific goal of preparing students for GMAS assessments and district-level testing. Next, I discuss how expectations for the district, such as district-level testing, take precedence over expectations from the state including the GMAS assessments.

Expectations from the District Take Precedence Over Expectations from the State

Even though the focus of this study was to investigate how teachers' sensemaking Georgia's ESSA Plan assessment requirements affect their instructional practice, the majority of teachers both of EOC and EOG tested courses and non-tested courses interviewed discussed how district assessments were more at the forefront of their discussions about instructional planning more so than the state administered EOG and EOC assessments. The teachers described the

pressure to make sure students were prepared for district-level tests more than the GMAS assessments. For example, Jackie described the feeling of pressure and disappointment due to the weight of district-level testing. District testing was significant for her considering that her 6th grade social studies course did not have an EOG. She elucidated her experience:

> It plays a huge role because I know there's going to be accountability. It adds a lot of pressure. And a lot of pressure because, well, I feel a lot of times with all of the pressure it is kind of overwhelming… When you get your scores back from the district tests and you see how your students scored in the yellow or red and you're like "I know, I know. They know this, they know this." It can be a bit discouraging at times. And that discouragement at times will make you go harder. It will add more heat.

Even while describing her experience, Jackie's voice quivered. For her, the pressure for her students to perform well on district assessments was a heavy burden to bear.

Jessica not only described the her frustration with district testing, but also her dismay on how much emphasis was placed on testing from the district, especially how students are viewed. She explained:

> I think what the district wants us to do is to teach to a test. From what I have observed and learned, you know, that a lot of students are treated like numbers, you know, like a score. They have incentives for teachers … the better your scores the more [rewards and recognition] you could earn. I don't know if I necessarily agree with that because during my schooling to become an educator I was always taught that everybody learns differently. And so, you have to be prepared to teach in many different ways and you know, your teaching may look differently than your neighbor's teaching. And that should be okay because all students have different needs. However, I have noticed that the

> district wants a much more regimented, cookie cutter type of education. And it is hard, I will say to meet the expectation as the testing requirements versus my inner moral conscience.

Even as a teacher of a course not assessed by the GMAS, the impact of testing was still palpable. For Jessica, district-level testing hindered her instructional practice as she felt as though there was no room for deviation from the instructional framework and instructional resources provided by the district.

Beverly also discussed the eminence of district testing and its impact on instructional planning:

> Before we get down to GMAS season or that time of the year, it's all about that interim. It's all about the interim and it defines everything that we do. Every plan that we make it's all geared to students' performance on those district assessments.

Being focused on the standards assessed on district assessments, as well as GMAS assessments, was a common theme throughout the teacher interviews. Stephanie discussed how the 8th grade ELA content team used the district test blueprint to guide their instructional planning, "While day-to-day we focus on the classroom tests, it all goes back to the district assessments. When we get the blueprints for the assessments we always say, okay have we covered this well enough, you know, the heavy hitters?" The heavy hitters included standards with the most questions on the test or standards that the students' usually underperformed on.

Teachers, who had previously taught in other districts across the state, expressed their confusion with the prominence of conversations about district-level testing in planning meetings. Robin was one of those teachers who was perplexed about the importance of district-level testing over GMAS testing. She said:

> I feel that there's a greater sense of urgency around the state. Our district testing appears to be more rigorous that the state testing. And if the students can align to the way we're doing it at the district level, we have no problem meeting the goal of the state level. So of course, I think the district level is a little bit more high-stakes, even though that's not what is to be. Right? Your state-level is supposed to be more.

Having taught in previous Georgia school districts, Robin admitted that she was confused why discussions during planning meetings were more focused on district-level testing rather than the EOC taken by her 8th grade science students. Especially when the scores from the EOC would be used to evaluate the school and determine its College and Career Readiness Performance Index score.

Lindsay also was mystified by the school's focus on district testing. Before accepting an offer to work at SMS, Lindsay said she looked up the school's CCRPI score. The school's score was in the high 70s, just under a B rating. She was not dismayed and felt that she could help the school achieve a score in the B range. However, once the school year began and she learned of the greater emphasis on district-level testing she was stunned. She voiced her bewilderment saying:

> And I said, they're almost at a B. With a little more push and a bit of direct intervention where they need it, they can get the score up. Little did I know they were talking more about district assessments. So, we're almost a B school according to the state, but that's not good enough. I don't think that's fair.

While it may not be fair, the district set the priority for schools and the focus on district testing was a primary component of the instructional program.

While some teachers expressed frustration with district-level testing, Richard welcomed the usage of district testing to his instruction and instructional practice. District tests, from his perspective:

> The district [assessments] get a lot more active discussion because we get the blueprint and we also have more resources to know what's going on…the district tests probably gets a little more weight because it's a little bit more on us. We also get a lot more data a lot quicker… The district test is way more useful to me as a teacher that the GMAS because I don't get the GMAS data until it's too late. But I like using the them, we probably discuss the layout of the district exams more … My hope would be the district exams are at least aligned somewhat to the milestones. They seem to be in least in terms of structure. So, it's like a sort of check in to see where we are. And I definitely use the second semester of interim data to prepare my GMAS instruction reviews to know where they are, where they're weak.

Richard was in the minority in his perception of district testing. For him, the tests were a way to inform instruction and prepare for the GMAS. Although other teachers referred to the use of district testing to assess the effectiveness of their instruction, most referred to district tests as a point of frustration. The pressure associated with performing well, both individually and in terms of how the content and grade level ranked when compared to other middle schools across the district outweighed the usefulness of the data the tests provided in preparation for the GMAS and to inform classroom instruction.

From the perspective of SMS's school leaders, the district assessments were of greater emphasis because of the way the district evaluated and graded the school. The rating from the district, from the administrative perspective, was worth more than the school's CCRPI score

from the state. The district evaluated schools on multiple metrics, including the school's CCRPI score, GMAS assessment data, and district test scores. It also factored in subgroups such as special education students and whether not the school had been identified as a Title I school. Both Sandra and Renee commented the expectation is that if the students do well on the district assessments then they should score well on the GMAS assessments. In her experience as an assistant principal and principal, Sandra described if her students did well on the district exams they subsequently did well on the milestones. She explained:

> Your district assessment test has to be aligned. And it has to be rigorous. I found that when my teachers plan really well…and the students do well, then they automatically do well on the milestones. So, whatever my scores were on a district assessment lined up to how they did on the milestones. So, if 70% were at proficient and distinguished they were going to be there on the milestones also.

Renee expressed similar sentiment about the district's stance saying, "So, there is greater emphasis on the district. The way the district evaluates schools is the [individual school report card (ISRC)] and there's almost this expectation that you're going to score above the state average on the CCRPI." From the administration's perspective, the data provided by district assessments were important for how the how the school will be evaluated according to district standards and as a projection of students' performance on the GMAS. However, the school's ISRC was of more concern than the CCRPI. Sandra explained it this way:

> The ISRC and CCRPI are not the same. The ISRC is for the district. And so that dictates if you are in the top or if you're in the 5% or further back. So, the IRSC helps them as a district decide if you are going to need specialists in your building, if you're going to get

help, or if you are going to be targeted. The CCRPI doesn't do that for us. The CCPRI is more of a document.

From Sandra's interview, a principal's perspective, how SMS scored on the ISRC was of greater importance. Thus, how the school was ranked among the other middle schools in the district was of greater consequence than the schools CCRPI rating from the state. The internal evaluation of the school—the rewards and praise versus the pressure of being a target school—was the driving factor resulting in the prominence of district objectives, such as district testing, over the expectations of the state.

At Stanton Middle School, district-level testing took priority over state-level Georgia Milestones Assessment assessments. Teachers' instructional planning was structured to ensure that students performed well on district-level tests with minimal emphasis was given towards GMAS testing. The emphasis on district-level testing was due to how the school would be evaluated by the district's internal report card, the independent school report card. School leaders were more concerned with how the school ranked amongst comparable schools in the district rather than the state-issued score on the CCRPI.

Summary

From the interviews conducted of two SMS school leaders and 11 teachers, three theme emerged. For the first theme, practice over policy, educator understanding of policy is best understood through their practice. While teachers and school leaders were not very knowledgeable of Georgia's ESSA Plan, they did understand the policy through GMAS testing. For the second theme, testing drives teachers' instructional practice, data revealed that teachers' instructional practice was fueled by the understanding that what is taught will be tested either by the EOC and EOG GMAS assessments, district tests, or both. Thus, testing not only effected

how teacher planned their instruction, but also the time they spend teaching as well as instructional materials used in the classroom. Teachers spent a significant amount of time at work and in their personal time, planning instruction. The consequences for the students and themselves were too high for teachers to be lax in their planning and overall instructional practice. When compared to prior research, there were some findings that were similar to prior research, different from prior research, and new contributions to the literature. Similar findings included the pressure placed upon teachers to prepare students to pass the test as well as test-focused instruction. Differences included an expanded curriculum as district-level testing encompassed all grades and content areas, including science and social. This was a shift from the narrowing of the curriculum that resulted under NCLB. The pressures of timing and the impact of testing on students' grades was a finding not founding in prior research. Lastly, the third theme, expectations from the district take precedence over expectations from the state, showed how the priorities of the district and district-level testing took priority over the expectations of the state. How the district evaluated the school and the metric used (e.g., district test scores) were a point of frustration for the teachers as they felt it added an additional burden to their work. From the standpoint of school leaders, the district's priorities were of great importance because how the school was ranked amongst its counterparts was viewed as a point of pride or dismay. Each of the themes is further discussed in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5: DICUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate how teachers' made sense of the testing requirements specified in Georgia's ESSA Plan and how these understandings influenced their instructional practice. Additionally, this study explored how school leaders supported teachers as they made sense of the plan's testing requirements. From the semi-structured interviews of school leaders and teachers from Stanton Middle School, three themes emerged from the data. Those themes and study findings, as analyzed through the sensemaking theoretical framework and relevant literature, are discussed in this chapter. Recommendations for school leaders and teachers illustrating the importance of introducing and discussing education policy issues as well as implications for future research are also discussed.

Discussion

The research questions were addressed through the development of three prominent themes from the data of interviews conducted with Stanton Middle School teachers and school leaders. Those themes were: (1) practice over policy, (2) testing drives teachers' instructional practice, and (3) expectations from the district take precedence over expectations from the state. They are discussed collectively as they are interconnected and paint of picture of SMS's teachers' sensemaking of the assessment requirements specified in Georgia's ESSA Plan and how it affects their instructional practice.

Making Sense of State Education Policy with a District Focus

Weick's (1995) sensemaking theory maintained that organizations have their own unique identity and it is through that identity that those inside of the organization make sense of or understand its innermost workings. How an organization functions, develops, and thrives is

predicated on the individuals or sensemakers within the entity. Schools, like other organizations, are comprised of individuals who, using both internal and external stimuli, make sense of the environment and community in which they work. Education policies, such as the ESSA, provide a framework that shapes the work of teachers and school leaders. From the quality of instruction occurring in classrooms to ensuring that students in special education are appropriately served, education policy influences the work of teachers and school leaders. However, when the sensemakers in the organization do not reserve time for conversations about the policies that shape their work, the process of organizational sensemaking is stifled. Spillane et. al (2002a) contended that how teachers in the school understand policy is contingent on the role of school leaders. Without the guidance of school leaders, teachers have a difficult time making sense of policy as they understand it through the environment in which it is implemented. Thus, time and space must be provided for sensemakers to engage in conversations about policy, especially policy that affects their instruction. School leaders, as the chief sensemakers of the school, also need time to unpack policy and consider how it impacts teachers as well as how they are to implement it. The successful implementation of policy is dependent on how school leaders communicate policy messages (Spillane et al., 2002a).

Both SMS teachers and school leaders had minimal understanding of Georgia's ESSA Plan as a policy. Hence, the practical application of the plan was more prevalent than its understanding as a policy and the consequences associated with failing to comply with it. The plan was understood from all interviewees in terms of end-of-grade and end-of-course assessments that are a part of the Georgia Milestone Assessment System. Little to no time was dedicated to conversations about education policy or policy-related matters at SMS. Furthermore, there was no training or professional development provided for teachers that

allowed them to unpack the testing requirements specified in Georgia's ESSA Plan. This resulted in no opportunities for teachers to make sense of or discuss how the testing requirements in Georgia's ESSA Plan affected their practice even though it did affect their practice. Instead, there was an understanding that GMAS assessments were a reality and teachers were responsible for making sure that students were prepared. Moreover, the limited knowledge of Georgia's ESSA Plan by school leaders made it difficult to engage in sensemaking. Without a strong foundational understanding of Georgia's ESSA plan, other than the administration of GMAS assessment, SMS school leaders were unable to facilitate discussions that connected policy to practice.

The cognitive framework for sensemaking and implementation of education developed by Spillane et al. (2002a) maintained that teachers make sense of policy and subsequently implementation is based on prior knowledge, experience, values, and beliefs. Sensemaking occurs both individually and collectively. Additionally, the environment in which policy is unpacked and implemented plays a role in sensemaking. How actors, or teachers, receive and interpret policy messages, is also important to sense-making and implementation. When analyzed through Spillane et al.'s (2002a) sensemaking and policy implementation framework, the lack of dialogue about policy at SMS inhibited the ability of teachers and school leaders make sense of Georgia's ESSA Plan. Instead the focus was on implementation. Stanton Middle School teachers and school leaders knew that their instructional practice was important to ensuring that students performed at high-levels on end-of-grade assessments specified in Georgia's ESSA Plan. However, there was greater emphasis to ensure that students performed well on the district-level assessments.

During the discourse of our interview, SMS's assistant principal Renee even questioned how and where teachers learn policies. She was especially concerned considering the number of new teachers working in the school who were career-changers and earning their teaching certificate through the district's alternate certification program. Teachers openly discussed their limited knowledge of the education policies that shape their practice. What they did know came from graduate school courses or from information from teacher advocacy organizations such as the Professional Association of Georgia Educators and the Georgia Association of Educators. Teachers and schools leaders are not policy experts nor should they be expected to be such. However, from the interviewers, the teachers expressed that having knowledge about policy is important to their practice. For example, Richard expressed that teachers should be knowledgeable and aware of policies such as the ESSA not only for the sake of their work but also for the sake of knowing who is crafting the policy. He stated, "Should teachers now about education laws and policies? Absolutely…Teachers need to know what other people are deciding is best for them." One teacher commented that they believed that school leaders did not want them to know about policies so they could do want they wanted to do to teachers and students. Another remarked that school leaders were so focused on the standards and teaching that other more significant issues were going by the wayside. Stephanie summed up her experience with education policy indicating that:

> In my limited experience learning about educational law and policies, three years, I've found that unless the teacher takes it upon themselves to learn such policies and especially changes in the local and state legislation, they are often left in the dark about such legalities and policies. Now, some teacher groups, PAGE for example, make a point to keep their members in the loop about legislation voting and changes, but keeping up

> with the changes that are all very important to one's teaching approach and the resources teachers have available is difficult for newer teachers, possibly for all teachers, because they are still getting used to all of the facets of teaching and everything that goes into the profession. I have heard of most of the policies [used in schools]. However, there is very little that I truly understand enough to explain to another person.

Stephanie's thoughts were similar to many others in the study. The day-to-day work of teaching and learning was at the forefront of their daily practice more so than the policies that influenced their instructional practice. While this makes sense from a teacher's perspective, a lack of policy knowledge is not considered acceptable, especially when a teacher's actions are deemed inappropriate or unethical.

Instructional planning meetings were highly structured and focused on planning lessons and discussing the appropriate steps to ensure students were provided with high quality instruction. Teachers struggled with the weight of testing, especially district-level testing, on their instructional practice as it contradicted with their personal values, beliefs about their themselves as teachers. The weight of testing impacted instructional timing, the focus on instructional planning geared specifically on testing and ensuring educational equity, and the types of instructional activities used in the classroom. The joy and autonomy that teachers' attributed to instructional practice was diminished even when the district and school administrators provided instructional resources for teachers. Those resources were not always aligned to what would be assessed on the GMAS assessments. Instead, the resources were more aligned to the district-level tests.

Specifically addressing the research questions in the study, findings addressing the first research question, how do suburban Georgia middle grades teachers' sensemaking of the Georgia

Every Student Succeeds Act Plan End of Grade assessment requirements affect their instructional practice?, can be summarized as: (1) Stanton Middle School's understanding of Georgia's ESSA Plan and assessment requirements was limited and school leaders did not provide teachers opportunities for sensemaking of the testing requirements and (2) teachers' instructional practice was not affected, primarily, by their sensemaking of the testing requirements specified in Georgia's ESSA Plan, but rather the emphasis was on district-level testing. The second research question, how do suburban Georgia middle grades school leaders support teachers' instructional practice as they implement annual assessment requirements under the Georgia Every Student Succeeds Act Plan?, can be answered from finding that suggest: (1) SMS school leaders lack of knowledge about Georgia's ESSA Plan as a policy and the lack of emphasis on the GMAS assessments, did little to contribute to teachers' sensemaking and how end-of-grade assessments specified in Georgia ESSA Plan affected their instructional practice and (2) district provided instructional resources aided teachers as they planned their instruction. However, some teachers indicated that some of the resources were not aligned to academic standards that would be assessed on the GMAS assessments. Overall, the pervasiveness of district priorities at SMS made the objectives of the study—sensemaking of federal education policy and its subsequent implementation as elucidated through teachers' instructional practice—difficult to examine. The lack of focus on the state's education policy stifled sensemaking, while also hindering implementation. Honig (2006) maintained that policy implementation is influenced by three factors policy, people, and place. It is the interaction of these factors that determines the success or failure of implementation. In the case of SMS, the school had people (the teachers) and the place (classrooms), but the policy foundation was missing.

The data from the study suggested that the SMS teachers and school leaders lacked an understand of Georgia's ESSA Plan and how the testing requirements specified in the plan affected their instructional practice painting a picture of them being incompetent and uniformed. However, I would argue that the greater emphasis on district priorities, including district-level testing, overshadowed the expectations from the state. The greater emphasis on district-priorities could be attributed to Williams County School's strategic waiver partnership with Georgia's State Board of Education. The SWSS partnership has allowed WCS incorporate unique and innovative instructional programming resulting in the development of its own academic standards, testing program, internal school evaluation system, and methods for remediating nonperforming schools.

The achievement targets specified in WCS's SWSS partnership contract are based on CCRPI scores. Thus, it portrays a puzzling picture. One might ask why the emphasis is on district priorities and district-level testing when the district's ability to maintain its flexibility was based on state-level metrics. Especially considering from the interviews it was found that very little attention was given to the importance of these components of Georgia's accountability system and how teachers' instructional practice contributed to these mechanisms of accountability. Furthermore, the results of this study suggest that there was little to no dialogue about the public picture of the school and how the state measures the effectiveness of the school using the CCRPI. Sandra, the school's principal, acknowledged that the CCRPI report was a document the school was aware of, but was of little or no consequence. However, when the school's public report card was examined, a report card that differed from the independent school report card, the data reported were GMAS scores and included the school's CCRPI score; the public report card was a district produced document similar to the state's CCPRI score report.

The independent school report card was the district's internal evaluation while the CCRPI was the state's external evaluation of the school. For SMS school leaders, how the school performed on the ISRC was more important as the consequences from the district posed an even greater threat than consequences imposed by the state. During Sandra's interview the discrepancy between how the district evaluated the school compared to the state was discussed. Thinking aloud she even pondered why more emphasis was not given to the CCRPI score or report card. She also questioned why a CCRPI score in the high 70s, higher than the state average, would not be perceived as acceptable by the district. A CCPRI score, as Lindsay referenced in her interview, is "a score a lot of school's would love to have." Conversely, the school was rated poorly by the district's IRSC resulting in the school being considered as a targeted school. As a targeted school, teachers' instructional practice was focused on ensuring that students would perform well on district assessments resulting in an improved ISRC. This emphasis was expressed in teacher and school leader interviews. For example, during our interview Renee discussed how the focus was performing to district expectations, saying:

> I always come away with this sense of as long as we focus on our standards and learning goals, our students are going to perform on the Georgia milestones. I don't hardly spend any time worried about the milestones. I think I spend more time worrying about are we teaching the standards at higher levels, which is what they emphasize to us at our administrators meetings.

Renee also indicated that because the district's tests were much more rigorous than the milestones, there was no cause for concern. Conversely, a concern expressed by teachers was when the district's tests were not aligned to the standards the milestones assesses.

The SWSS partnership between the Georgia board of education and SWC demonstrates a unique intersection between states, local school boards, and education policy. Fuhrman and Elmore (1990) referred to state and local relations as a "zero-sum game" (p. 83). In essence, the one who pays makes the rules. Therefore, because the state primarily funds education they have the power minimize district priorities in favor of state priorities. However, further research found that the increases in state education policy fueled an increase in policy-based activity at the local level (Elmore, 1993). This is referred to as a "positive sum" relationship where, as posited by Elmore, "Many localities have picked up state reform themes and build local constituencies for them, pushing the much further than state policy required" (Elmore, 1993, p. 99). This effect on policy is not widespread but it does raise concerns that such approaches spur differences among local district rather than commonalities. Thus, Williams County Schools', and subsequently SMS's, prioritization of district priorities over those of the state illustrates how WCS has benefited from the positive-sum effect where high-performing school districts have been able to capitalize on state-local relationships. Or, as maintained by Elmore (1993):

> increased state-policy making around student standards, for example, has resulted in a surge of local activity, especially in already high-performing districts, the result of which has been to raise local standards above the new state standards in an effort to maintain the district's position relative to other districts. (p. 99)

The flexibility afforded by the SWSS partnership coupled with district's capacity as a high-performing district allowed WCS to give precedence to its own priorities; priorities that contributed to SMS's focus on district priorities more than the expectations from the state. Stanton Middle School's focus on district-level testing over the state-level EOG and EOC assessment as well as the importance of the score on the district's independent school report card

over the state's CCRPI score demonstrated how expectations from the district outweighed those of the state. Thus, the purpose of the Georgia ESSA plan and the importance of end-of-grade assessments appeared insignificant. The district's expectations dominated instructional planning meetings. Hence, the results from the study suggest that the district's instructional programming superseded the state and other Georgia school districts. This finding is important because it illustrates the policy making power of local education agencies as well as the policy dynamics between the state and local level.

Recommendations

At the center of this study was education policy. Policy that is impactful to teachers' instructional practice. Thus, it is important that leaders and teachers make sense of state and local education policies to ensure that they are appropriately implemented. Even though SMS's school leaders take their guidance from district leaders, I recommend that they invest time to engage in policy-based conversations with their faculty and staff. Educators need an understanding of their state education policies as well as the laws that influence teachers' instructional practice, some of which include educating students in foster care (Title I, Part A), ELL students (Title III, Part A, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). While teachers may be educated in pedagogical strategies to educate these children, they may not be nuanced in intricacies of policy that influence how they engage with those students and their families. For example, issues of privacy and confidentiality. These policies are an extension of local and state-based policies (e.g., mandated reporter, sexual harassment) that teachers are provided training with at the beginning of each school year. The responsibility to start and engage teachers in policy discussions is the responsibility of school leaders. Hence, they must take the initiative to familiarize themselves with policies before engaging in conversations with teachers. If they feel

uncomfortable facilitating those conversations, they should draw upon the resources from the district asking that an expert speak to the staff.

I further recommend school leaders also have conversations about the district's expectations compared to expectations from the state. The expectations are not mutually exclusive of each other. Helping teachers to understand the connection between the work that they do is not only significant to how the school is evaluated by the district's ISRC, but also on the state's CCRPI score. This is especially important to consider the number of first-year or early-career teachers who are new to the profession after graduating from college or as career changers who are obtaining their certification from the district's alternative teacher certification program. As the saying goes, the sum of the whole is only as strong as its parts. At SMS, understanding education policy is an important part to the success of the whole school.

Implications for Further Research

Although the aim of this study was to investigate the affect end-of-grade assessments specified in Georgia's ESSA Plan had on teachers' instructional practice, the findings yielded much more. First, to further investigate the research questions posed in the study, it is recommended that additional investigations be conducted in schools and districts in which the weight of the district and district priorities are not as influential. Second, further research must be conducted to understand how WCS's district priorities are implemented in other schools across the district. Stanton Middle School was the case chosen for the study. However, the a case study that incorporates more Williams County Schools or a case study of the district itself is recommended. Lastly, further research much be conducted about Georgia's SWSS and the balance of policy between the state and local level. Moreover, research must conducted evaluating the effectiveness of SWSS districts as they implement instructional programming

different from traditional education approaches. This is even more significant considering that the majority of school districts in Georgia are strategic waiver school systems.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine how the testing requirements specified in Georgia's ESSA Plan effected teachers' instructional practice as well as the support given to teachers by school leaders as they implemented the law. Considering that the ESSA reduced the amount or number of state tests administered to students at the end of a course or school year, the premise of the study was to further understand how and if teachers' instructional practice changed, if at all, because of the reduction in testing. Prior research, particularly during the era of NCLB, demonstrated that high-stakes testing under NCLB impacted classroom instruction shifting how and what courses were taught as well as time given to test preparation. Would a shift to less testing cause teachers to become lax in their teaching, especially those who at one time had an EOG (e.g., 6th grade science)? Or, would math and ELA teachers continue to feel the same pressure to perform as they did under NCLB? Based on the findings from this study, those questions were not directly addressed.

The strong district focus of the school under study made it difficult to clearly see and understand if the testing requirements specified in Georgia's ESSA Plan had any bearing on teachers' instructional practice. From the perspective of SMS, the district focus was a point of pride that guided their work. However, that focus may be considered narrow as it does not encompass the broader perspective of the Georgia's accountability system, how it evaluates schools, and generates a CCRPI score report to be reviewed by stakeholders, particularly parents.

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APPENDIX A

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
CONSENT FORM

SUBURBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS' SENSEMAKING OF TESTING REQUIREMENTS: A CASE STUDY OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF STATE POLICY AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL

Researcher's Statement
We are asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to be in the study. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you would like to participate. This process is called "informed consent."

Principal Investigator: Sheneka Williams
Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy
smwill@uga.edu

Co-Investigator: Kimberly West
Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy
kew84216@uga.edu

Purpose of the Study
The research study is being conducted to learn about how teachers make sense of or understand education policy and how it effects implementation of the policy as demonstrated by instructional practice. As well as the support provided by school leaders as teachers implement the Every Student Succeeds Act.

Study Procedures
If you agree to participate, you will:

- Participate in an interview to discuss how teachers make sense of or understand education policy and how it effects implementation of the policy as demonstrated by instructional practice. As well as the support provided by school leaders as teachers implement the Every Student Succeeds Act.

- The interview can take up to 90 minutes.
- Be audio recorded during the interview so that responses may be transcribed, coded, and analyzed for emerging themes. Recordings will be archived after transcription and destroyed after five years.

Risks and Discomforts
We anticipate no risks to participating in the study.

Benefits
- There are no direct benefits for participating in the study.
- Your input will provide information to educators and education policymakers so that they can make the most informed decisions concerning the development of education policy and the factors that affect its implementation.

Incentives for participation
A $5 gift card to Starbucks will be provided to all interview participants.

Audio/Video Recording
Audio recording devices will be used during the interview so that responses may be transcribed, coded, and analyzed for emerging themes. Recordings will be archived after transcription and destroyed after five years.

Privacy/Confidentiality
Audio recording devices will be used during the interview so that responses may be transcribed, coded, and analyzed for emerging themes. The research team will have access to the notes and audio recording. The interview notes and audio file will be stored in a password protected file and will only be accessible by the research team. Recordings will be archived after transcription and destroyed after five years. We will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless required by law.

Taking art is voluntary
Your involvement in the study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate before the study begins, and discontinue at any time, with no penalty or loss of benefits to which he/she is otherwise entitled.

If you have questions
The main researcher conducting this study is Kimberly West under the supervision of the principal investigator listed on page 1. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Kimberly at kew84216@uga.edu or at (770) XXX-XXXX.

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:
To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must click on the "Yes" button indicating you consent to participate in the study.

APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT LETTER

Hello.

My name is Kimberly West and I am a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy at the University of Georgia. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about how teachers make sense of or understand education policy and how it affects implementation of the policy as demonstrated by instructional practice.

If you decided to participate in this study, you will be invited to be interviewed so that I may gain a more in-depth understanding of the focus of the study. All interview participants will receive a $5 gift card to Starbucks.

To participate in the study, please reply to this email. I can also be contacted via phone at (770) XXX-XXXX or via email at kew84216@uga.edu.

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you have any questions about the study, please email or contact me at kew84216@uga.edu or (770) XXX-XXXX. You may also contact my dissertation committee chair and principal investigator of the study in the Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy at the University of Georgia, Dr. Sheneka Williams, at smwill@uga.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Kimberly E. West, Ed.S.
Ph.D. Candidate, Education Policy & Administration
Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, & Policy
University of Georgia
Email: kew84216@uga.edu

APPENDIX C

TEACHER INTERVIEW GUIDE

SUBURBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS' SENSEMAKING OF TESTING REQUIREMENTS: A CASE STUDY OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF STATE POLICY AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL

Thank you for allowing me to interview you for my research. Before we begin, I want to tell you a little about myself and provide you with some information about the research study.

To begin, my name is Kimberly West, and I am a Doctoral Candidate at the University of Georgia studying Educational Administration and Policy. My research centers around how teachers make sense of or understand education policy and how it effects implementation of the policy as demonstrated by instructional practice. Thus, the interview that I will conduct with you today will help me to better understand my area of study.

Are there any questions you would like to ask me before we continue?

Before we begin the interview, I would like to remind you that the information you share during the interview will be kept confidential as explained in the consent form. I will not use your name or any other identifying information about you that might allow someone to figure out who you are. Feel free to skip any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering. You may also stop the interview at any time. I anticipate that the interview may take up to 90 minutes. I will be asking you several questions. However, if you have questions during any point of the interview, please feel free to ask. At this point, do you have any questions for me before we begin?

To begin our conversation, I would like to learn more about you and your students.

TEACHER DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS:

- Tell me your name, current grade, and subject(s) that you teach.
- Tell me about your teaching background. For example, how long you have been a teacher, the schools you have taught in, as well as the subjects and grade levels you have taught.
- How many years have you taught (subject) in the general education/inclusive/self-contained/resource setting at this school?
- Tell me about your educational background and training. For example, where did you receive your teacher training. As well as any professional development courses you have taken.

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS:

- Describe your classroom setting (e.g., general education, inclusion, self-contained, resource).

- How many classes/subject do you teach a day?
- How many students are in each class?
- How many male students?
- How many female students?
- What is the racial make-up of the students you teach (e.g., the number of Black students)?
- How many disabled students, meaning students with IEPs, do you teach?
- How many English-Language Learners do you teach?
- How many gifted students do you teach?

CLASS STRUCTURE QUESTIONS:

- Are classes organized or scheduled according to ability level (e.g., all gifted students)?
- How are daily classes scheduled (e.g., block schedule)?
- How many minutes is each class period?
- How long are transitions between class periods?

Transition: **Thank you for providing me with background information about yourself, your students, and class structure. I want to learn more about how you make sense of education policy and implement in your classroom. In order to learn more about that, I have several questions that will guide our conversation and more may arise as we discuss. Let's begin.**

Research Question 1: What do teachers know about the education policies that influence their practice, more specifically the Every Student Succeeds Act? How do teachers make sense of the Every Student Succeeds Act?

- What do you know about the Every Student Succeeds Act?
    - How did you learn about the Every Student Succeeds Act?
    - Have you shared what you know or learned with any of your colleagues?
- What do you know about Georgia's Every Student Succeeds Act plan?
    - How did you learn about Georgia's Every Student Succeeds Act plan?
    - Have you shared what you know or learned with any of your colleagues?

Transition: Next, I want to ask you about your knowledge of annual testing requirements and how they impact your instructional practice.

Research Question 2: How does teachers' knowledge of the annual assessment requirements under the Every Student Succeeds Act affect their instructional practices?

- What you know about testing requirements under Georgia's Every Student Succeeds Act plan?
    - How have state testing requirements changed over the past few years?
- Describe the district's testing policy (e.g., types of tests, frequency, and consequences of results for students and teachers).
    - How have district testing requirements changed over the past few years?
- Describe the school's testing policy (e.g., types of tests, frequency, and consequences of results for students and teachers).

    - How have school testing requirements changed over the past few years?
- How much time do you spend planning and preparing for instruction?
    - How has testing influenced this?
- How often do you plan with your colleagues, fellow academic content teachers?
    - How has testing influenced how you plan and prepare for instruction?
- Describe the instructional practices that you use regularly.
    - Has testing influenced your choice of instructional practices? If so, how? Please explain.
- Describe any resources (e.g., curriculum guides) that you use to plan and prepare for instruction.
    - Who prepares these resources?
    - Are the beneficial in helping students to prepare for assessments, in particular state-level testing? Please explain.

Transition: Thank you for sharing your responses with me. For the next set of questions, I want to learn more about the support you receive from school leaders as you implement the Every Student Succeeds Act in your classroom.

Research Question 3: How do school leaders support teachers in making sense of and implementing annual assessment requirements under the Every Student Succeeds Act at the classroom level?

- Have you received any formal training from the school about the Every Student Succeeds Act? If so, please describe the training.
- Have you received any formal training from the school about Georgia's Every Student Succeeds Act plan? If so, please describe the training.
- How often do school leaders (e.g., the principal) emphasize state-level testing when planning and preparing for instruction? Please explain.
- How often do school leaders (e.g., the principal) emphasize district-level testing when planning and preparing for instruction? Please explain.
- Describe the types of support given by school leaders as you implement the Every Student Succeeds Act.

Transition: Thank you for your willingness to share with me.

Final Questions: Though I have asked many questions of you, I want to give you the opportunity to share with me anything else that you would like to add. Is there anything you would like to share with me about how you make sense of education policy, your instructional practices, state testing, or the support you receive from school leaders regarding the ESSA?

***Wrap-Up*:** I want to thank you for allowing me to interview you to learn more about your classroom. I also want to thank you for your time. If I have any follow-up questions, may I contact you again?

APPENDIX D

SCHOOL LEADER INTERVIEW GUIDE

SUBURBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS' SENSEMAKING OF TESTING REQUIREMENTS: A CASE STUDY OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF STATE POLICY AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL

Thank you for allowing me to interview you for my research. Before we begin, I want to tell you a little about myself and provide you with some information about the research study.

To begin, my name is Kimberly West, and I am a Doctoral Candidate at the University of Georgia studying Educational Administration and Policy. My research centers around how teachers make sense of or understand education policy and how it effects implementation of the policy as demonstrated by instructional practice. Thus, the interview that I will conduct with you today will help me to better understand my area of study.

Are there any questions you would like to ask me before we continue?

Before we begin the interview, I would like to remind you that the information you share during the interview will be kept confidential as explained in the consent form. I will not use your name or any other identifying information about you that might allow someone to figure out who you are. Feel free to skip any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering. You may also stop the interview at any time. I anticipate that the interview may take up to 90 minutes. I will be asking you several questions. However, if you have questions during any point of the interview, please feel free to ask. At this point, do you have any questions for me before we begin?

To begin our conversation, I would like to learn more about you and your school.

SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS:

- Describe your experience working in K-12 education?
- How long have you been in your current position?
- What grade levels are served by the school?
- Please describe the school's make-up. What is the school's:
  i) Total enrollment?
  ii) Total number of students identified as English Language Learners (ELLs)?
  iii) Total number of students enrolled that are identified as special needs or students with disabilities (SPED/SWD)?
  iv) Total number of students identified as special needs or students with disabilities (SPED/SWD) and English Language Learners (ELLs)?

v) Enrollment by gender?
vi) Enrollment by race?
vii) Enrollment by socioeconomic status?

- Please describe the school's teacher composition.
  i) How many teachers per grade level?
  ii) How many special education teachers?
  iii) How many special education service providers, such as speech and language therapists?
  iv) How many English Language Learner (ELL) teachers?
- What best describes the community in which the school is located?

Transition: Transition: **Thank you for providing me with background information about yourself and your school. I want to learn more about the support you give teachers as they make sense of education policy and implement in the classroom. In order to learn more about that, I have several questions that will guide our conversation and more may arise as we discuss. Let's begin.**

Research Question 3: How do school leaders support teachers in making sense of and implementing annual assessment requirements under the Every Student Succeeds Act at the classroom level?

- What do you know about the Every Student Succeeds Act?
  - How did you learn about the Every Student Succeeds Act?
- What do you know about Georgia's Every Student Succeeds Act plan?
  - How did you learn about Georgia's Every Student Succeeds Act plan?
- How familiar are you with the testing requirements under Georgia's Every Student Succeeds Act plan?
- Describe the guidance or information you have provided to teachers about this area of policy.
- How do you help teachers, both new and experienced, to make sense of education policy?
- How much time is given to issues of education policy in formal settings, such as staff meetings or professional learning communities?
- Describe any school-based trainings that have been provided to teachers about the Every Student Succeeds Act of Georgia Every Student Succeeds Act plan?
- Describe the types of instructional support your provide teachers as they implement the Every Student Succeeds Act.
- How often do you emphasize state-level testing as teachers plan and prepare for instruction? Please explain.
- How often do you emphasize district-level testing as teachers plan and prepare for instruction? Please explain.

Transition: Thank you for your willingness to share with me.

Final Questions: Though I have asked many questions of you, I want to give you the opportunity to share with me anything else that you would like to add. Is there anything you would like to share with me about how you make sense of education policy, your instructional practices, state testing, or the support you receive from school leaders regarding the ESSA?

Wrap-Up**:** I want to thank you for allowing me to interview you to learn more about your classroom. I also want to thank you for your time. If I have any follow-up questions, may I contact you again?