High Stakes Test and Students with Learning Disabilities

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by

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This Master's Research Project has been approved

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Abstract

The goal of the project was to determine the nature of the relationship between Ohio Graduation test scores for students with learning disabilities, students with other disabilities, and their typically developing peers and their perceptions of preparedness and confidence. Students, teachers, and administrators were surveyed to gain insight on what practices were being implemented within the classrooms to prepare students for high stakes testing. The student’s surveys were compared with their test Ohio Graduation Test results from the spring of 2014 testing date.
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This research examined the performance on high stakes tests of students with and without learning disabilities, and other disabilities. The researcher studied the performance of typically developing students in general education, students with learning disabilities, and students with disabilities other than a learning disability.

The researcher surveyed sophomore students to gather their perceptions of high stakes tests and how prepared they felt for the upcoming tests. The researcher also surveyed sophomore teachers to see how they feel about their students taking the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) during the spring of 2014 and how they prepared their students for the OGT. The school district administrators of the school district were surveyed to determine the administrative standpoint regarding standardized testing and how they have coached their teachers to prepare their students to perform to the best of their abilities on the OGT.

Separate surveys were created for sophomore students, sophomore teachers, and administrators. The surveys gathered information based on self-perception of preparedness by the students taking the Ohio Graduation Test, and teachers’ self-perception of their abilities to prepare their students for the Ohio Graduation Test. The administrators survey asked how the school in typically scores on the Ohio Graduation Test as well as the specific performance of students with learning disabilities. The standardized tests results used to compare with student, teacher, and administrator perceptions came from the Ohio Graduation test, which were available in the spring after the surveys were administered.

The goal of this research project was to determine the nature of the relationship between test scores for students with learning disabilities and other disabilities compared to students without learning disabilities. The results of this research provides insights into the impact of high
stakes testing on students who are typically functioning as well as the impact on students with learning disabilities or other disabilities.

**Review of the Literature**

High stakes tests such as the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) are a concern for students of all ages. Teachers are concerned about preparing their students for high stakes tests they students will be taking that year or in the near future. Whether a student is gifted, performing at grade level, below grade level, or with or without a disability, high stakes tests are important and all students take them. High stakes tests are especially challenging for low-functioning students and students with disabilities.

High stakes tests are defined as “passing a test that is tied to a certain outcome” (Yell, Katsiyannis, Collins, & Losinski, 2012, p. 60) such as graduating from high school. High stakes tests are more than unit tests at the end of a chapter, there is more at stake. Students starting in grade school all the way through high school take high stakes assessments and in the state of Ohio, graduation is currently contingent on passing the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT). Table 1 provides the OGT performance levels defined for all five content area test(s). Although the ranges vary from test to test, a score of 400 is considered passing for all tests.

Table 1

*Ohio Graduation Test Performance Levels* (Ohio Department of Education, p. 26)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Basic</th>
<th>Limited</th>
<th>Proficient</th>
<th>Accelerated</th>
<th>Advanced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>262-382</td>
<td>383-399</td>
<td>400-428</td>
<td>429-447</td>
<td>448-552</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>252-383</td>
<td>384-399</td>
<td>400-424</td>
<td>425-443</td>
<td>444-556</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>269-377</td>
<td>378-399</td>
<td>400-429</td>
<td>430-475</td>
<td>476-566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>210-370</td>
<td>371-399</td>
<td>400-424</td>
<td>425-444</td>
<td>445-591</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
By the end of high school, these high stakes tests are a contributing factor to whether a student is able to graduate from high school, and can determine if a student will get into college, what colleges the student will be able to attend based on the score they earned, and even potential scholarships based on their testing scores. High stakes tests currently required in the state of Ohio include: the Ohio Achievement Assessments (OAA), taken by third through eighth graders, the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) that is currently taken by high school sophomores. The American College Testing (ACT) and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) are not required to graduate from high school, but both are taken by college-bound high school students for admittance into post-secondary education.

At this time, incoming sophomores through seniors are required to have four units of English language arts, a half unit of health, four units of mathematics, a half unit of physical education, three units of science, three units of social studies, and five elective credits along with economics and fine arts credits. In addition to the number of credits students are required to have in order to graduate, students must also pass all five tests on the OGT, unless otherwise stated in a student’s IEP. According to Ohio House Bill 487, the 2014-2015-sophomore class will be the last class to take the OGT. After the 2014-2015 academic school year, in addition to the current course requirements, students will also be required to take end of course exams for algebra I and geometry or integrated math I and II, physical science, American history and American government, and English I and II (Ohio Department of Education, 2014, para. 1). Students will also need to meet one of the following three requirements:
1. Earn a cumulative passing score on seven end-of-course exams. The scores will be set by the State Board of Education. 2. Earn a “remediation-free” score on a nationally recognized college admission exam such as ACT or SAT. The state of Ohio will pay for all 11th grade students to take the exam free of charge. 3. Earn a State Board of Education-approved, industry recognized credential or a state-issued license for practice in a career and achieve a score that demonstrates workforce readiness and employability on a job skills assessment (Ohio Department of Education, 2014).

**Students with Disabilities**

A student with a learning disability is diagnosed on the basis of the following areas: Developmental, medical, educational, family history, test scores and teacher observations, and any previous interventions that have been implemented on the student. By definition, a “specific learning disorder is now a single, overall diagnosis, incorporating deficits that impact student achievement and is described very specifically in the areas of reading, mathematics, and written expression” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 1).

**Learning disabilities.** Students with learning disabilities have a various mixture of disorders related to processing, including auditory, visual, and memory processes (Steele, 2010). Students with learning disabilities have academic trouble in at least one area, but typically in multiple areas (Steele, 2008). Learning disabilities have an impact on students’ comprehension, reading, and writing abilities, as well as mathematics (Westendorp, Hartman, Houwen, Smith, & Visscher, 2011, p. 2774). These disorders result in students requiring extra time, modifications, and accommodations when testing. “It is a challenge, however, for the students to pass the courses and particularly the related high stakes tests that may be involved” (Steele, 2010, p. 21).

**Benefits of Standardized Testing**
Standardized testing is becoming a major factor for teachers in the field of education. Teachers want to see their students perform well on standardized testing for the sake of the student, the school district, and the state of Ohio. In the state of Ohio, teachers’ pay will be determined partially by how well their students perform on standardized testing and student growth within the academic school year based on Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs). The state of Ohio participated in *Race to the Top*, adopted the national standards for mathematics and English, and will soon switch from administering the OGT to the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments.

*Race to the Top* is a four-year grant program “designed to encourage and reward states that are creating the conditions for education innovation and reform” (U. S. Department of Education, 2012, p. 2). The national program was designed to “adopt standards and assessments to prepare students for college and the workforce, build up and keep effective teachers and principals, measure student success and improve teachers, and improve the schools performing at the lowest levels in the state” (U. S. Department of Education, 2012, p. 2). The program is designed to support schools with financial grants in order to help them reach their goals. The state of Ohio outlines the following goals for the Race to the Top program:

- to reduce academic performance gaps by 50 percent on national and statewide assessments for underrepresented and majority students in participating Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and community schools, and to reduce the gap between Ohio and the nation’s best-performing states by 50 percent on national reading and mathematics assessments (Department of Education, 2012, p. 3)

The state of Ohio recently adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for the mathematics and English content areas; Ohio created and implemented their own standards for
science and social studies. “The standards are for English language arts and mathematics: science and social studies standards have also been revised” (Ohio Department of Education, 2012, p. 4).

Additionally, Ohio has created a new evaluation system for educators: Ohio Teacher Evaluation System (OTES). The new evaluation system will apply to both principals and teachers, which has implications for “professional development and human resource decisions, including retention, dismissal, tenure, and compensation” (Department of Education, 2012, p. 4).

The third major educational change in Ohio education is the move from requiring students to take the Ohio Graduation Test to taking the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, commonly referred to as the PARCC assessments (Department of Education, 2012, p. 10). As previously stated, students will be required to pass seven end of course exams and PARCC assessments, in addition to any course requirements in order to graduate from high school. Ohio is one of fifteen states participating in the PARCC assessments that will be administered during the 2014-2015 academic school year. States taking part in the PARCC assessments “share the fundamental goal: ensuring that every student graduates from high school prepared for success in college and the workplace” (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, 2014). The PARCC assessments are computer-based tests that are aligned with the CCSS.

Race to the Top is focused on the implementation of rigorous college-and-career-ready standards and assessments that measure how prepared students are for success in college and careers. An integral aspect of education reform in all Race to the Top states is the combination of the latest changes in the state standards, evaluation systems, and assessments for students, meant to create a more authentic learning experience for the students while creating a more successful educational system and improving state standardized test scores (Department of Education, 2012,
The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) states “assessments must be designed and developed from the beginning to be accessible and valid for the widest range of students” (Gartland & Stronsnider, 2004, p. 69).

Over the past few years, Ohio has taken part in initiatives to improve the educational system and has undergone changes each year in the evaluation of teachers, the standards upon which the curriculum is based, and now changes in the standardized testing and graduation requirements. Standardized testing is an inevitable factor in schools; with change comes challenges for all students, regardless of whether or not they have an identified disability. Through the changes the educational system has made in the state of Ohio, the way students learn and are assessed will change dramatically and will be a new way of learning and assessing for students of all abilities. The changes are designed to better meet students’ needs and maximize their abilities.

**Challenges of Standardized Testing**

High-stakes tests have more implications and impact for students than a quiz or test at the end of a chapter in a specific content area. Standardized testing can cause extra stress and anxiety for students, which can affect students’ performance on the test; outcomes that are true of all students and even more so for students with learning disabilities (Lagares & Connor, 2009). Although the Ohio Department of Education is optimistic about the changes being made in the educational system, there will still be standardized testing for students, which poses major obstacles for students with learning disabilities. Standardized testing can impact students with disabilities for the rest of their lives, whether it is the options they have for post-secondary education or their level of confidence in themselves when placed in high-pressure situations. Students with learning disabilities continuously score lower on standardized tests in comparison
to general education students who do not have an academic disability (Carter et al., 2005). Students with learning disabilities need coaching to prepare them for taking standardized tests and to be taught test taking strategies they will be able to effectively implement when they are taking standardized tests independently.

**Impact on students with disabilities.** According to Carter et al. (2005), “students with high-incidence disabilities perform poorly on measure of academic performance compared to their peers without disabilities” (p. 55). The authors continue, “high stakes tests are used to make decisions such as the type of diploma a student will receive or decisions about access to future educational opportunities...decisions that can have lifelong consequences and directly affect an individual’s economic outlook and well-being as an adult” (Carter et al., 2005, p. 55).

Additionally,

Based on the level of these high stakes tests, the consequences include: increased referrals to special education, lowered expectations of learning, focused instruction only on the test objectives, directed teaching to the test format, limited range of program options, increased frequency of retention, and increased dropout (Carter et al., 2005 p. 56)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is a program mandated by the Department of Education that has been in place since 2002 with the purpose of “ensuring that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (P.L 107-110, 2002, p. 15). All students, regardless of race or disability are expected to take one standardized test per year in grades three through eight and then one time in high school.
Meek (2006) states “NCLB exams are too long, too dense, and too difficult when it comes to readability” (p. 295). “Students with mild to moderate disabilities will give up on standardized tests because of how long the tests are, regardless of the prior instruction, coaching, appropriate accommodation, and genuine effort” (Meek, 2006, p. 296). Carter and colleagues indicate, “Educators are expending considerable energy trying to identify effective strategies for improving students’ scores on state-wide-assessments. Researchers and practitioners should continue to explore and evaluate strategies for equipping adolescents with high-incidence disabilities to meet high academic standards” (2005, p. 61).

Given the prevalence of high stakes testing, and the unique needs of students with learning disabilities and the implications of the test results for all students, this research was designed to explore the relationship between the two. This research has a unique focus on the students themselves, exploring their perspectives of how prepared they felt to take the Ohio Graduation Test, the high stakes test currently in use in the State of Ohio, where passing is required for graduation from high school.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this research was to:

1. Determine the nature of the relationship between OGT test scores for students with learning disabilities, students with other disabilities, and their typically developing peers.

2. Determine differences between the student’s perceptions of their preparedness for the OGT and their scores (by group) on the Ohio Graduation Test by group.

3. Determine teachers’ preparation strategies for the OGT their students diagnosed with LD, students with other disabilities, and students without disabilities.
4. Determine teacher’s perception of their students’ preparedness for the OGT for students with LD, students with other disabilities, and students without disabilities.

**Method**

**Context**

This study took place at a small rural high school in Southeast, Ohio in a school district that is predominately white, non-Hispanic and economically disadvantaged. Within this small school district, about one fifth of the population are students that have been identified with a learning disability. The four-year graduation rate is at 95%. The researcher was a teaching fellow at the time of the study. A teaching fellow is defined as a part-time licensed teacher employed by the local university who works in the P-12 classroom, while completing university coursework for a second license.

**Participants**

This study required participants to be high school students with sophomore status who were taking the Ohio Graduation Test for the first time in the spring of 2014. Other participants were teachers of sophomore students, the superintendent of the school district, the principal, and guidance counselor.

The entire sophomore class, made up of eighty students, was invited to participate in the study. After the consent forms were sent home with each student, seventeen students had the consent waiver signed by a parent or legal guardian and fifteen students attended and participated in the survey where they signed a student assent form indicating their willingness to participate. The students fell in one of three categories: typically developing, learning disabled, or other disability; all three categories were represented by participants in the survey. Of the participants,
thirteen were students without a disability, two were students with an identified learning
disability, and one student with a disability other than a learning disability.

Teachers were invited to take the teacher survey if they were currently teaching
sophomore students, regardless of their content area. Eighteen teachers were sent invitations to
participate in the study; ten teachers participated in the study. Finally, administrators were
chosen by their position and role within the district. The superintendent and principal hold
administrative positions within the school. The guidance counselor was also included as an
administrator because of this individual’s role with the OGT’s. This individual is fully in charge
of every aspect of the OGT and oversees the organization and administration process for the test.
Of the three administrators invited to participate in the survey, two took part in the study.

Instrumentation

Surveys for students. The purpose of the survey given to sophomore students was to
gather information on how prepared they felt for the OGT and the perceptions they had of
themselves prior to taking the OGT for the first time. Students were asked a variety of questions
where they were asked to rate their preparedness and concern, tests they felt they would pass the
first time, and tests they were concerned about passing. The final question asked students if they
knew of any accommodations or modifications they would be receiving the day of the test. To
see the entire survey the sophomores were given, see Appendix A.

Surveys for teachers. The teachers were asked basic questions such as how long they
had been teaching, their areas of licensure, and the nature of their current job at the high school.
Several questions focused on strategies the teachers were using in their classroom to prepare all
of their students for the OGT as well as strategies specifically used with the students they were
teaching who were identified with a learning disability. Teachers were asked how prepared they
felt their students were, how they believed they would perform on the standardized tests and what accommodations and modifications they use in their classroom. For the full survey the teachers were invited to take, see Appendix B.

**Surveys for administrators.** Administrators were asked more global questions about how their sophomores tended to score on the OGT’s year after year. The administrators were asked how the students with identified learning disabilities typically score in comparison to how students score who have not been identified with a disability. A main focus of the survey also included how the administrators have coached their teachers to prepare their students in the months, weeks, and days, prior to administration of the OGT. For the full survey administered to the administrators, see Appendix C.

**Procedures**

**Obtaining consent.** Prior to beginning research, approval was requested for the entire project from the Superintendent and Principal of the school district. Approval was received from the guidance counselor and school psychologist for the use of the Individualized Education Plans (IEP) and received consent from all subjects through a consent form that was sent home with each student to be signed by their parent or legal guardian. The IEPs are available to the faculty in the school who work with students with disabilities. As a teaching fellow, the researcher had access to students’ IEPs. Consent forms were distributed to the entire sophomore class.

**Data collection procedures for students.** For the student who returned their consent forms, they were taken to the computer lab during extended advisory to complete the survey. Prior to beginning the survey, students were given an assent form to read and sign. Students were given a code to put in on their survey that would let the researcher know whether the student was typically functioning, had a learning disability, or had some other disability. A master code was
used where all students who are in general education were assigned the letter “A” and a number to follow. Students with a diagnosed learning disability on an IEP were assigned the letter “B” and a number to follow. Students who receive any other type of Special Education service were assigned the letter “C” and a number to follow.

**Data collection procedures for teachers and administrators.** Teachers who had students taking the OGT in Spring 2014 were sent an email invitation containing a link to the survey. An email invitation was also sent to the intervention specialists, guidance counselor, principal, and superintendent. Teachers and administrators consented to taking the survey by clicking on the link at the bottom of the consent form, which directed them to the survey page. Teachers took a survey that was different from the survey given to the administrators.

**Data analysis.** After the OGT scores were reported to the school, individual test results were examined for each sophomore student participant. Test results and survey data were analyzed by looking at the test results of how each student scored on each content test of the OGT. The test results were broken down and categorized by students in general education, students with learning disabilities, and students with disabilities other than a learning disability. The percentages of each test passed by the total number of participants in that specific category were compared. The survey results were analyzed to see if students performed accurately predicted how they would perform on the test and how they felt about taking the test at the time of the survey.

**Results**

In the section to follow, the results are presented from the students, teachers, and administrators’ surveys. Key questions the participants were asked are discussed along with the responses that were provided. The OGT scores from the students are reported and compared with
their original perceptions and levels of confidence and concern prior to taking the OGT.

**Students**

Of the entire sophomore class at this high school, fifteen students had the consent waiver signed by their parent or legal guardian and attended and participated in the survey where they signed their assent form. The students fell in one of three categories: typically developing, learning disabled, or other disability; all three categories were represented as participants in the survey.

Students were asked how prepared they felt for taking the OGT, the mean for all of the participants was 6.4. Typically developing students on average rated their preparedness at a 6.2, students with a learning disability averaged a 4, and students with other disabilities averaged a 6. Students were asked what their school did to prepare them for the OGT. Students responded by saying they did practice problems and also attended required OGT tutoring which lasted three weeks for each content area (science, math, social studies, English).

**Strategies.** Outside of school, six students reported they did not do anything to prepare for the OGT, while six studied for the test, and three did work for their classes in preparation for the test. Of the students who spent time outside of school preparing for the test either studied outside notes they were given in OGT tutoring sessions or did practice tests online. The students with identified disabilities reported doing homework for class and studying at home in order to prepare for the high stakes test.

When students were asked how their teachers helped them prepare for the OGT, students reported they were given vocabulary to study, past test questions to solve, OGT strategies and tips, and tutoring during lunch.
Standardized tests versus regular tests Of the fifteen student participants who took part in the survey, eleven said that taking the OGT is different from taking any other test, three students said there is no difference between the OGT and any other test, and one student did not provide an answer. Specifically, all students who participated in the survey that had an identified disability reported that the OGT is different than taking any other test.

Level of concern Overall, student participants ranked their level of concern about taking the OGT at a mean of 6.33 and SD=3.04. By group, typically developing students were ranked at 6.42 and SD=3.09 students with a learning disability had a mean of 7.0 and SD=4.24, and students with other identified disabilities ranked their level of concern as 4.0 and SD=0. Reasons for their ratings of concern included: not wanting to have to retake the test, having the fear of getting a score of basic, which is a score below 400, never passing practice tests, and because testing makes them nervous.

Confidence as related to specific content areas. Students were asked which test they felt most confident about taking; the responses to this question are shown below in Table 2. Table 3 shows the results of the participants in response to the question about which OGT test the students were most concerned about taking.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OGT content area tests the students felt most confident about taking</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
OGT content area test students were most concerned about taking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OGT test students are most concerned about taking</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

Testing accommodations/modifications. Students were asked if they would be receiving any modifications or accommodations during the OGT. Twelve students reported they would not receive any accommodations or modifications, one student stated the accommodations and modifications they would receive, two students were unsure of whether they would be receiving any modifications or accommodations during the OGT.

OGT scores. Table 4 provides the results of the OGT testing scores for the fifteen participants in the study. There were no students who performed basic, the lowest range a score could possibly fall under. Students with an identified learning disability scored either limited, a score below 400 that is not a passing score, or proficient which is a passing score over 400.
OGT test results from sophomore participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Students without a disability</th>
<th>Students with an identified learning disability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teachers

Of the ten teachers that participated in the survey, half have been teaching for twenty plus years. The teachers that took the survey are certified to teach social studies, special education, mathematics, music, science, English, family consumer sciences, computer science, and interactive multimedia. All of the teachers who participated in the survey teach students with disabilities.

Test preparation strategies. The strategies teachers reported using to prepare students for the OGT include: literacy strategies, test taking skills, problem solving recognition, OGT test prep, formulas for written responses, aligning the curriculum to the test, in addition to reading and writing strategies.

Perceptions of preparedness. Teachers were asked to rate how concerned they were overall about their students’ achievement on the OGT on a scale of 1-10. The teachers were then
asked, on a scale of 1-10, how prepared they felt their students were to take and pass the OGT. The mean value teachers rated their level of concern for their students was a 6.8 and SD= 2.86 while they rated their students level of preparedness at a 7.6 and SD=1.96.

Teachers were also asked to explain their ratings of how prepared they felt their students were to take the OGT. A few teachers stated they had exceptional students and felt they were quite prepared for the high stakes test while other teachers felt that students with disabilities were at a disadvantage due to their disability. A main concern for teachers was that there wasn’t enough time to cover the entire curriculum over a seventeen-week course; especially with the amount of snow/calamity days the school had over the course of the year.

In the 2014-2015 academic school year, the school district had seventeen calamity days. Of the seventeen days missed due to poor weather conditions, five days were originally allowed to be missed, and four more were later forgiven by Governor Kasich. The school was left to make-up eight days. The school district opted to add thirty minutes to each day for twenty-two days in order to make up two missed days. Students and teachers also reported on the Friday and Monday of President’s weekend as well as the last week of May to make up the final four calamity days.

Teachers were specifically asked how prepared they felt their students with an identified learning disability were for the OGT. The mean rating was a 5.3 and SD = 1.95. Teachers stated that students with identified learning disabilities struggle with reading and that these students face more obstacles to retention and understanding. Other teachers stated that it is difficult for the students to get the help that they need due to the lack of the support from the intervention specialists and the lack of one-on-one attention the students desperately need. Much of this problem stems from the limited amount of funding the school is either allotted for hiring staff
members or the number of professionals in student support services the administration is willing to have on staff. Other teachers stated that some students would not be ready no matter what the teachers do to prepare them for the test.

**Predicted student performance.** When the teachers were asked their prediction on how they believed their students with learning disabilities would perform on the OGT, five teachers responded “average” while the remaining five teachers responded “below average.” Following this question, teachers were asked what strategies they use to specifically help prepare students with learning disabilities for high stakes testing.

**Preparation strategies.** When teaching students with learning disabilities, additional strategies are often needed to help prepare students for high stakes tests. Teachers at this school reported placing additional focus on problem solving, student led learning, repetition with material, building confidence, and working on how to manage stress. The final question asked which accommodations or modifications the teachers used in their classroom for students identified with disabilities. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

*Allowable accommodations and modifications teachers use in their classroom*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accommodation/ Modification</th>
<th>Responses (n = 10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extended Time</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shortened Assignments</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have Assignments Read to the Student</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a Scribe</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptive Furniture</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amplification Device</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feature</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breaks During Test or Quiz</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarifying Directions</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of a Dictionary or Thesaurus</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Different Paper</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Reference Sheets</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large Print Text</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Tech Writing Tolls</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Audio CD</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magnification Device</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipulatives</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testing at a Specific Time of Day to Meet the</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs of the Student</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of a Word Processor to Key Responses</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal Design for Learning</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Administrators**

The superintendent and principal of the school district were surveyed about how prepared they perceived the sophomore class to be for the OGT as well as how they help teachers prepare students with learning disabilities for the high stakes test. The administrators were sent emails with an explanation of the survey, benefits, and risks associated with the study, along with a link to the survey at the bottom of the page. By clicking the link at the bottom, the administrators consented to participating in the survey and were directed to the survey page. When the two individuals were asked how the sophomores typically perform on the OGT, they reported that the
scores are some of the highest in the area and also mentioned that their math, reading, and writing scores generally score higher, whereas social studies and science scores tend to fall short.

The administrators also indicated that the students with identified learning disabilities don’t typically perform quite as well as the general education students and that of the students that do not pass the high stakes test, those who do not pass are typically students identified with a learning disability.

One school-wide strategy that has been implemented across all core subjects is OGT tutoring. OGT tutoring occurs during lunch in the three months leading up to test week. Each student is assigned a group and content area to start with, and all students must attend tutoring for the first half of lunch for the entire three months. After three weeks, students rotate to another content area for tutoring.

It appears that teachers have a strong opinion regarding how their students would perform on standardized testing and the reasons behind their beliefs. The students, teachers, and administration have clearly laid out a plan for preparing students for the OGT with the required tutoring during the lunch period; all parties expressed an understanding of this mandatory strategy. Based on the teachers’ responses, they are preparing their students the best they can with the available time and resources they have been given. Based on the responses of the sophomore participants, the perceptions of students, teachers, and administrators prior to testing did not align with the actual scores from the OGT.

**Discussion**

The original goal of the project was to determine the nature of the relationship between OGT test scores for students with learning disabilities, students with other disabilities, and their typically developing peers and their perceptions of preparedness and confidence.
Overall Passing Rates

Based on the test results from the OGT and the results from the survey, there appears to be no relationship between having an identified disability or not, and passing the OGT, one of Ohio’s high stakes tests. Of the participants with identified learning disabilities, all students passed all of their content area tests (math, science, social studies, English) with the exception of one student who did not pass the math OGT. The one participating student that had an identified disability other than a learning disability did not take the OGT because the student qualified for the Ohio Alternative Assessment. The researcher was unaware that this student would be taking the OAA until after the sophomores had completed the survey.

Student Perceptions Versus Actual Performance

The typically developing students who participated in this study passed more tests than they predicted when they responded to the survey prior to taking the OGT. It appears that students perceived themselves to be less prepared than the truly were, in that they were able to pass more tests than they predicted they would be able to pass. It is interesting to note that with the tests students were the least confident about taking (i.e., social studies and math), they ended up having the highest passing rates. The one individual in the category of having a disability other than a learning disability was one of the students who took the OAA so there were no OGT results for this student.

Teachers’ Perceptions

Based on survey results, teachers believed their students were prepared but were concerned about how they would perform on the high stakes tests. These findings may indicate teachers could be underestimating their students’ abilities for a variety of reasons, which may
include: lack of effort or motivation in class, failure to apply knowledge in the classroom, and lack of time to prepare students.

Preparation strategies. The survey results indicate that teachers are implementing literacy strategies, OGT test preparation, and problem solving strategies. Although the strategies the teachers are implementing are strong, teachers believed efforts towards helping students with learning disabilities were insufficient. Many teachers feel that identified students are not always able to achieve success no matter how hard they try or that their disability is the reason for failure. Contrary to their predictions, the results show that students with learning disabilities can perform well on high stakes tests such as the OGT and they do have the ability to pass them when provided with the necessary modifications and accommodations. Teachers need to have a clear plan for implementing practices with their students, including the students they teach with identified learning disabilities, and other disabilities.

It is important to remember that general education teachers, you are responsible for all of the students in the classroom and must find ways to help all students learn and succeed. It is imperative for teachers and intervention specialists to understand each other’s roles and know what to expect from their co-workers so that collaboration can take place to benefit the needs of all learners.

Administrators’ Perspectives

Carter et al. (2005), stated “students with high-incidence disabilities perform poorly on measure of academic performance compared to their peers without disabilities” (p. 55). A comparison of the study’s findings to Carter’s findings, students identified with learning disabilities had passing rates equal to those of their typically developing peers. In short, the results and findings from previous studies did not match up with the results from this study; the
students with learning disabilities performed at a proficient level with the exception of one student on one content test. However, the feelings and perceptions the students with learning disabilities reported prior to the testing week did match up with the emotions and feelings reported in previous studies and research. For instance, many students with learning disabilities experience test difficulties and test anxiety. The students reported being very concerned before the testing, however their results indicate their anxieties, fears, and concerns did not negatively impact their scores.

**Limitations**

Limitations in this study are related to the sample size of each population that participated in the research study and possible to the time and resources available for test preparation and specific efforts the teachers and school district provided for the sophomores.

**Implications for Practice**

The Ohio Department of Education pushes for formal assessments that are high stakes for both teachers and students. However, students with a learning disability need to practice and prepare for high stakes tests. “Informal assessment will have benefits by providing practice for the end of year formal assessments, as well as preparing students for tests and instruction in post-secondary programs” (Steele, 2010, p. 23). Other suggestions have been given to better serve students with learning disabilities. Meek (2006) suggests out-of-grade-level testing, partial testing within a given subject, and focusing on particular subject areas (p. 296, 297). Teachers cannot control how a student performs the day of their high stakes test. All a teacher can do is prepare their students, especially those with disabilities, to the best of their ability, so that when the students take their tests, the students will feel confident in themselves from the repetition of practice and preparation for their tests. Steele (2008) provides strategies for students with
disabilities to use when approaching high stakes tests. Test-taking strategies include:

“previewing the entire test, analyzing the directions carefully, underlining words as they read directions, recording formulas, mnemonics or lists they have memorized, not to spend too much time on difficult questions, and to save time at the end of the test to review answers and edit any essays” (Steele, 2008, p. 42).

**Recommendations and Conclusions**

For any replications of this study, in the future, it would be critical to include more participants. It is very difficult to have a great deal of confidence or generalize the findings when the sample sizes for each group of students was so small; this could impact the final results and implications for practice and recommendations for the future. For future replications of this study, it would be imperative to emphasize the importance of the input from all participants by requesting that all participants take the survey seriously and view the study as an opportunity to make the school, students, and test scores better for the good of the cause.

When working with students, especially those with learning disabilities, it is important to boost their confidence and help them feel they have the ability to achieve academic success. Students need confidence in themselves and the knowledge that they have. Finding out individual concerns, worries, and anxieties of students is an important factor when preparing students for standardized testing. The teacher or intervention specialist can implement strategies and interventions to help the students overcome specific areas of concern.

In this study, teachers reported providing students with a list of accommodations and modifications in the classroom. When preparing students for high-stakes testing, it is critical to only allow them to prepare with the accommodations and modifications they will be allowed to
use on the test day. Students with disabilities need consistency and need to practice the way testing will go leading up to the standardized tests.

All administrators in a district need to be on the same page with regard to standardized testing across their district. The limited administrator responses in this study did not align with one another, which could lead to potential problems when it comes to preparing, planning, and providing resources to teachers and students for high stakes testing.

Summary

Standardized testing is not going away. “Schools are under pressure to reform their curriculum and instructional practices in order to become high performing schools on high-stakes tests” (Spencer, Garcia-Simpson, Carter, & Boon, 2008, p. 1). Educators need to teach in such a way that is not directed toward the standardized test itself, but rather teaches students with learning disabilities test-taking strategies that will be second nature to the students so they will be able to implement themselves as they are taking high stakes tests. “Organizational and attention deficits are typical of students with learning disabilities and make success in secondary school settings even more complicated” (Steele, 2010, p. 22). “Many special education teachers and administrators agree that the experience can be damaging to children’s self-concept and motivation to succeed” (Meek, 2006, p. 295). General education teachers and intervention specialists need to implement the appropriate accommodations and modifications consistently for learning disabled students on every test they take so they are conditioned to what services they are able to receive when they are taking a standardized test. “All students feel increased pressure to constantly demonstrate improved levels of academic performance. For students with cognitive and behavioral challenges, these tensions are greatly exacerbated” (Lagares & Connor, 2009, p. 63). With the new teacher evaluation system, teachers will need to rely on their skills while
working to improve their teaching abilities and strategies to teach in such a way that all students, especially those with disabilities, truly understand the material, concepts, and reasoning behind what they are learning. “Less than one-third of learning-disabled students can be expected to pass high school competency exams” (Meek, 2006, p. 295). When students fully understand what they have been taught, they should be able to write about what they have learned in detail, verbalize their understanding to a peer, and visually represent their understanding if it is applicable to that concept. For a student to be able to do those three things, it will reassure their confidence in their knowledge on the subject matter and will release the pressure from them when they take a test over the material.

Reading scores and level of ability across the nation are unacceptable and should be a focus in the future. Students with disabilities typically have a disability in reading. Much of standardized testing and other high stakes tests come down to being able to read the question and comprehend what is being asked of the students. Once a student with learning disabilities has the capabilities of reading and understanding standardized test questions, they will be able to achieve and succeed.
References


Appendix A

Student Survey

1. On a scale of 1-10 how prepared do you feel about taking the Ohio Graduation Test?
   Not Prepared 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Prepared

2. What did you do in school to prepare for the Ohio Graduation Test?

3. What did you do outside of school to prepare for the Ohio Graduation Test?

4. How did your teacher help you prepare for the Ohio Graduation Test?

5. Is taking the Ohio Graduation Test different than taking any other test? Please explain your answer.

6. Rate your level of concern about taking the Ohio Graduation Test
   Not Concerned 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Concerned

7. Please explain your rating for question #6.

8. Which OGT test do you feel most confident about taking? (choose one)
   Social Studies  Science  Math  Reading  Writing

9. Please explain your answer to question #8.

10. Which OGT test are you most concerned about taking? (choose one)
    Social Studies  Science  Math  Reading  Writing

11. Please explain your answer to question #10.

12. Will you receive any modifications or accommodations during the Ohio Graduation Test that you know of? If so, what are they?

13. What do you need to help you do your best on the Ohio Graduation Test?

14. Which tests do you think you will pass the first time you take them? (Select all that apply):
    Social Studies
    Science
    Math
Reading  
Writing

15. Please explain your answer to question #14.

16. Please write in the code number you were given by your teacher for this survey.
Appendix B

Teacher Survey

1. How long have you been teaching?
   a. 0-3 years
   b. 3-5 years
   c. 5-10 years
   d. 10-15 years
   e. 15-20 years
   f. 20 or more years

2. What area(s) are you licensed to teach? (list all licensure areas)

3. What is your current job?
   a. General education teacher
   b. Special education teacher
   c. Other (Please write in)

4. What strategies are you using to prepare your students for the Ohio Graduation Test?

5. On a scale of 1-10 how concerned are you OVERALL about your students achievement on the Ohio Graduation Test?
   
   Not Concerned 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Concerned

6. On a scale of 1-10 how prepared do you feel your students are to take and pass the Ohio Graduation Test?
   
   Not Prepared 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Prepared

7. Please explain your answer to question #6.

8. Do you currently teach students with learning disabilities? Yes No

9. If you answered yes to question 7, how prepared do you feel students with learning disabilities are for the Ohio Graduation Test?
   
   Not Prepared 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Prepared

10. Please explain your answer to question #9.

11. On average, how do you believe students with learning disabilities will perform on the Ohio Graduation Test?
12. What strategies do you use to specifically help prepare students with learning disabilities for high stakes testing including the Ohio Graduation Test?

13. What strategies do you feel are most effective to help all students to prepare for the Ohio Graduation Test? Please explain.

14. What strategies do you feel are most effective to help students with learning disabilities to prepare for the Ohio Graduation Test? Please explain.

15. What accommodations or modifications do you use in your classroom room for your students?
   i. Extended Time
   ii. Shortened Assignments
   iii. Have assignments read to the student
   iv. Have a scribe
   v. Adaptive Furniture
   vi. Amplification Device
   vii. Breaks during a test or quiz
   viii. Clarifying directions
   ix. Use of a dictionary or thesaurus
   x. Use of different paper
   xi. Use of reference sheets
   xii. Large print text
   xiii. Low tech writing tools
   xiv. English Audio CD
   xv. Magnification Device
   xvi. Manipulatives
   xvii. Testing at a specific time of day to meet the needs of the student
   xviii. Use of a word processor to key responses
   xix. Universal Design for Learning
   xx. Other (please specify)

16. Is there anything else you would like me to know about this topic that you feel I haven’t asked? Please explain.
Appendix C

Administrator Survey

1. In general, how do the sophomores at this high school typically perform on the Ohio Graduation Test? Please explain.

2. How do the sophomores at this high school with identified learning disabilities typically perform on the Ohio Graduation Test? Please explain.

3. What strategies do teachers use to prepare all students for the Ohio Graduation Test throughout the year?

4. What strategies do teachers use to prepare all students for the Ohio Graduation Test the month before the test?

5. What strategies do teachers use to prepare all students for the Ohio Graduation Test the week before the test?

6. What strategies do teachers use to prepare all students for the Ohio Graduation Test the day before the test?

7. What strategies do teachers use to prepare all students for the Ohio Graduation Test the day of the test?

8. Do teachers do anything different to prepare students with learning disabilities for the Ohio Graduation Test? Please explain.

9. What, if any, measures or strategies are set in place to specifically prepare students with learning disabilities for the Ohio Graduation Test?

10. Where do students with learning disabilities typically fall in the range of test scores on the Ohio Graduation Test?

   Above Average  Average  Below Average

11. Why do you believe students with learning disabilities typically fall in this range of test scores?