

**THE IMPACT OF NCLB ON STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS SELF-
CONCEPT AS A RESULT OF STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENTS**

by

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Abstract

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB 2001) has had profound effects on all students. NCLB measures the progress of all students using grade-level equivalent assessments. Special education students who take assessments that are above their academic functioning level may experience feelings of being intellectually challenged because they are tested on content and standards to which they may never have been exposed. Students with disabilities who have individualized education plans that dictate their learning and modifications. If these students have individualized plans, then a logical assessment choice would be individualized assessments in order to truly measure their progress accurately. The purpose of this study is to determine the impact of current assessment practices of NCLB on special education students through the use of questionnaires and interviews. Questionnaires were distributed to special education and general education teachers. The survey consisted of 10 questions that respondents answered along a Likert scale. Interviews with open-ended questions were conducted with randomly selected members of the same groups. Qualitative methods were used to analyze the data collected in the study. As a result, many of the students and teachers feel that standardized assessment practices are unfair to students and it is putting too much pressure on students as a whole. For example, during one of the interviews, a student participant clearly states that, “most students are going to struggle on the state standardized assessment because it puts too much pressure on kids.” Furthermore, the pressure is also being put on the students because their teachers’ employment is depending on their students’ scores. Although all students are being impacted, there is a significant negative impact on special

education students' self-concept as a result of state standardized assessment. The data revealed that there is a correlation between state standardized assessments and a negative impact of special education students' self-concept as a result of the implementation of state standardized assessments.

PREVIEW

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to all of the special education students that I have had the privilege to work with and will work with in the future. Also I would like to dedicate my work to my family.

PREVIEW

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my family for all of their support. Specifically, I want to thank my son, James, for being understanding and patient with me while I was completing my educational journey. James is the reason why I pushed to better myself to give him the best life I possibly can. I also would like to thank my husband, Dennis, for pushing me to overcome the many obstacles that I faced, took on my responsibilities so I could work through them, and be the voice of reason. Your love and support was crucial for my success. Thank you for believing in me. Also, I am grateful to my committee for all of their guidance and input. In addition, I would like to give a special thank you to my mentor, Dr. Horgen, for all of his support and guidance. I appreciate that he stuck by me in the tough times when things seemed hopeless. Lastly, I would like to thank my Dad for teaching me to never give up and to work hard to achieve my goals in life. He has set a strong example for me and I am grateful to have such a powerful role model in my life.

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Problem

The impact of state standardized assessments on students with disabilities and their academic self-concept is unknown. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002, para.1) has influenced students and their families since being enacted in 2002, but to what extent has students with disabilities been affected? Students with disabilities take grade level assessments with accommodations that are outlined in their Individualized Education Plans (IEP). The state standardized assessment that students take is based on their grade level, and not necessarily the academic level that they may be performing on. As a result, the mandate may make these students increasingly frustrated and discouraged.

It is essential for the NCLB mandate to be clearly delineated. Unfortunately, the interpretation of language used in the law may be viewed differently. For instance, the language implemented in the law and the defining populations of students are vague. As an example of this, Hardman (2006) goes on to state, “No Child Left Behind’s promise of ‘all means all’ includes students with disabilities” (p. 4). The mandate does not refer to any specific sub groups of students, but rather talks about the populations of students as a whole group. Furthermore, there is an urgency to determine how this legislation has impacted special education. With the change in presidential administrations, “advocates contend education programs were underfunded during the eight years of the Bush administration, and they are looking for substantial help for their favored programs from

President Obama, who campaigned on the pledges of increasing federal education spending” (Klein, 2009, p. 1).

Background of the Study, Context, and Theoretical Framework of Study

This study was focused on students with disabilities who have been placed in self-contained and mainstreamed classrooms at the elementary level in a city in New Jersey. Research was conducted to determine if the assessment practices mandated by NCLB have had an impact on students with disabilities. A theoretical framework will be discussed in the literature review.

In response to the testing of NCLB, some schools across the country do not show adequately yearly progress (AYP). The criteria used for schools to make AYP are based upon the results of a variety of subgroups, not the entire student population. When assessment scores are being analyzed, they are grouped by each grade level tested in which the entire grade level is represented. For instance, students who fail to demonstrate AYP are usually special education students. These students are required to perform at the same level as their nondisabled peers. According to NCLB, students who are exempted from passing standardized assessments are counted as failures.

One factor that impacts why a school may fail to meet AYP consistently was because the special education population was divided and disbursed to the classified students' home schools. A reason why students with disabilities may not attend their home school, or school they would attend based on where they live, was because their home school does not offer a program to meet their academic needs. In Special Education, student placement is determined by their disability and a group of people who collaborates and composes an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for each special

education student. The IEP team consists of a school psychologist, school social worker, special education teacher, general education teacher, the student's parent(s) or legal guardian, the student (if appropriate), and other staff members that may give crucial input to the student's Individualized Education Plan.

In some cases, a school district may have more than one elementary school, middle school, and/or high school. This depends on the size of the city or town. As a result the students with disabilities' assessment scores were recorded at the students' home schools, or the schools the students would have attended were they not participating in a special education program in a different location. Since NCLB mandated that students show progress and most states are utilizing state standardized assessments as the tool to demonstrate student progress each year, the way the assessment scores are being reported can either help or have a negative impact on a school or district. For instance, if the scores of special education students are reported as deficient, it will affect the AYP in their home school and not the school where those students are attending their educational program. As a result of reporting scores this way, districts can be seen as trying to report a more equal distribution of assessment scores from various student populations. For example, if one particular school houses a specialized program for special education students and those scores are reported as not proficient, that school's AYP would be much lower than a school that doesn't have special education programs or other populations of students that have scores that were reported as proficient. In addition, this could also have the opposite effect if the test scores were of students who were participating in gifted and talented programs in a particular school as well. When a school does not make AYP more than one year, some districts were

affected financially because of the strict mandates of NCLB. For example, each student must show AYP every school year or qualify for “Safe Harbor” where the student sub group decreases the number of non-proficient students by 10%. If a school does not show AYP, they become endangered of losing any extra federal funding they may be receiving, if any. According to the NCLB Act (2001), Title I schools will receive additional funding to remediate the students that are not demonstrating progress. In addition, “No Child Left Behind ensures that disadvantaged students may not be left behind under the Act’s accountability mandates” (Stephenson, 2006, p. 157). Although, if after the Title I school is identified and does not demonstrate AYP after the next year, then the school will loses its funding. A possible decrease in funding would lessen a school district’s ability to offer professional development opportunities and improved instructional materials, as well as impeding its hiring of additional highly qualified teachers.

When calculating assessment results for NCLB (2001), the minimum number of students for a significant subgroup is 20. For most schools, one of the subgroups was composed of students with English as a Second Language (ESL). This figure does not apply to special education students. For example, according to the NCLB Act (2001), the states calculate assessment results using the minimum number for special education students which are 35. Also, in elementary and middle schools, the number of students being assessed in each grade level was added together. Furthermore, in some states, at the high school level, there was only one grade level being assessed. One strategy a school districts may try implement to decrease the population of classified students was to declassify current special education students. This was done by having the child study team conduct a series of assessments to determine if a student was eligible for special

education and/or related services. As a result of the assessments, students' scores that were determined to be on their age appropriate grade level are found to be ineligible for special education and/or related services. The students who are declassified can still receive modifications as a result of Section 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act (1973).

NCLB may have had unintended effects on students with disabilities. For instance, with the mandate relying solely on test scores, one expert states that, "the pressure to do well on high-stakes testing can sometimes have exactly the opposite effect from the one that we seek" (Stiggins, 1999, p. 192). Flaws in the law may have led to undesirable impacts on students with disabilities and their families, building administrators, and school districts. NCLB was used as leverage for political agendas on both sides of the issue. Some experts (Stiggins, 1999) may argue that, "in high expectations and standards-based education, NCLB may not accurately measure the achievement of the special needs population" (1999, p.192). The law tries to measure student growth based on age-appropriate grade-level assessments. Yet other experts may argue that education of students is not a one-size-fits-all process. One expert to support this stated that "each year, proficiency targets get higher, making it harder for schools to clear that achievement bar, especially when it comes to subgroups, such as English-language learners and students with disabilities" (McNeil et al., 2011, p. 1). Why should assessment mirror this same imperfect idea?

Cognitive test anxiety was a factor that needed to be examined to support this study. "NCLB test scores are publicly reported and linked to rewards and sanctions, such as school funding, administration, and employment decisions, making this testing high-

stakes in nature for educators and communities” (Segool, Carlson, Goforth, Von Der Embse, & Barterian; pg.1, 2013). Segool, Carlson, Goforth, Von Der Embse and Barterian go on to point out that, “little research has been conducted that examines how individual students perceive these annual high-stakes tests and whether or not students experience heightened anxiety/distress in relation to them” (2013, p. 1). With cognitive test anxiety, individuals experience increased anxiety with academic assessments which then result with low assessment scores. Zeidner states that, “test anxiety comprises psychological, physiological, and behavioral reactions that occur in association with concern about the negative outcomes resulting from failure or poor performance in evaluative situations” (1998, p. 1). Three main components that were examined to see if there was any impact on special education students in this study: academic self-concept, perception of assessments, and perception of student’s self-concept. The main goal for elementary students was being successful in obtaining academic achievement, which guides them to achieving success as adults. Academic achievement was also an essential goal for schools across the country. It was imperative for school districts to show student knowledge of core curriculum standards and progress due to the implementation of the NCLB mandate. Assessment is a tool of measurement. States used standardized assessments to measure student knowledge and progress as outlined by state standards. At this point in time, the impact of standardized assessments on the academic self-concept of students with disabilities that are functioning below grade level in math and language arts was undetermined. Although the federal mandate was established and implemented for the benefit of all students, it is unclear if the state’s methods for measuring student achievement were fair and accurate. Currently, it is assumed that all students were

working on the same grade level associated with their chronological age. It is also presumed that the standardized assessments were accurately measuring the academic growth of each student annually. It is questionable if the standardized assessments being used by individual states to measure academic yearly growth were accurate and fair for all students participating in the assessment process. Also, can assessments be individualized in the same manner as the individual education plans for students that have disabilities? Another question to ponder was whether the measurement tools being used to determine AYP impacts disabled students' academic self-concept, especially if they are functioning below their grade-level peers? It was important to determine if the assessments being used to measure special education students' knowledge and progress were an effective and fair practice. It was imperative to keep in mind that not all assessments are appropriate for every child. Are they current state standardized assessments accurately measuring a student's yearly progress, but rather hurting his or her self-esteem when learning and taking tests? Could it be possible that a disabled child be subjected to undue anxiety because they are being tested on content that they have never been exposed to? Do the expectations of students with disabilities to participate in standardized assessments on grade level contradict their Individualized Education Plans, which dictate their academic program? This can be a contradiction if students with disabilities are not performing on the same academic level as their nondisabled peers. Another question to explore was, whether or not assessments can be individualized for students with disabilities? Also, can those assessments be aligned with each special education student's individualized education plan (IEP)? It needed to be determined if assessments can align with a student's present academic functioning level, and could the

state standardized assessments be a more accurate and effective assessment of that student's yearly progress. Could there be changes made to help lessen test anxiety among students with disabilities? These factors needed to be explored and considered.

Self-concept is how one feels about themselves as a whole. At any age, self-concept can be affected by many factors and can shape a person's motivation, self-worth, beliefs, feelings, expectations, and successes in life. Academic achievement can be impacted by a student's poor self-concept. Test anxiety can be caused by many factors that can affect a student's self-concept such as lack of content knowledge, not showing progress or being successful, a difficult testing environment, not being exposed to the same curriculum materials as their nondisabled peers, and a lack of study skills.

Determining if there was an impact on special education students, as a result of high stakes testing, can be crucial to their emotional well-being and successes in education and life. According to the experts, there was a distinct correlation between test anxiety and it impacting academic self-concept. "It is known that when any student, disabled or not, functioning on grade level or below, will not do well on a test if they are not confident with the material and as a result will have negative feelings towards themselves" (Smyth, 2008, p. 135).

As a result, this has a direct impact on their present and future performance on assessments. It is important to determine, if any, the impact that is being felt and how it is affecting students with disabilities.

In order to attempt to find answers in this study, a qualitative research design was chosen. The reason this design was chosen was because "this methodology can be instrumental in understanding complex interactions between individuals and their

environment, and how these phenomena influence outcomes” (Anderson, Leah, DelValle, Sherman, & Tansey, 2013, p. 90). In addition, “while qualitative approaches have been critiqued for not employing the rigor of quantitative studies, they provide a unique opportunity to explore and better understand complex, multifaceted phenomena that may not be practical with quantitative approaches” (Chwalisz, Shah, & Hand, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Hanley-Maxwell et al., 2007, p. 101). Input from interviews and surveys were be used to try and resolve the problems and impact. When using a qualitative research design, the data from interviews and questionnaires were be analyzed.

Statement of the Problem

The impact that state standardized assessments have on students with disabilities’ academic self-concept was unknown. Self-concept can be defined as “the way in which people perceive their strengths and weaknesses, abilities, attitudes, and values” (McInerney, Cheng, Mok, and Lam. P., 2012, p. 249). According to one expert, “students succeed academically only if they want to succeed and feel capable of doing so” (Stiggins, 1999, p. 192). Students that have a negative self-concept will also not show an accurate result when taking the end of year standardized assessments that are a tool to measure their yearly academic progress. Stiggins goes on to say that, “the pressure to do well on high-stakes testing can sometimes have exactly the opposite effect from the one that we seek” (Stiggins, 1999, p. 192). Another expert points out that, “while educational achievement testing purports to measure how well a student has acquired concepts and skills taught at school, student test performance was not simply the aftermath of exposure to the curriculum” (Pershey, 2011, p. 53). Furthermore, repeated failure may have an impact on students with disabilities’ self-concept. For instance, “for students, the

increasing pressure to score high on tests, combined with a lack of focused opportunities to learn, can lead to futility-a feeling of hopelessness-that can cause them to stop caring and stop trying” (Stiggins, 1999, p.192). Without more data, the impact of NCLB on special education students’ self-concept is largely unknown. Taking a closer look at those who are intimately involved with this issue, such as students with disabilities and their special and general education teachers, helped to determine if the assessments mandated by NCLB reflects best educational practice for special populations of students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine if state standardized assessments have an impact on special education students’ self-concept. Students with disabilities, who take state standardized assessments, in some cases, are tested above their academic functioning level. Sapp “defined test anxiety as a special case of general anxiety that has phenomenological, physiological, and behavioral responses related to the fear of failure” (1993, p. 183). For instance, Heath (2007) found during her study on test anxiety that:

The types of incidents reported included students crying; students feigning sickness to leave school; actual cases of illness including stomach aches, headaches, or nausea; a student taking medication that caused her to fall asleep during the test; students soiling their clothing; students who froze with anxiety and were unable to perform; students who “shut down” and “don’t care anymore”; students who are “uptight,” “antsy,” and “anxious”; students who are tense and easily “disturbed” or “agitated”; students who cannot sit still and cannot refrain from speaking out; and students “acting out” (Heath, 2007, p. 31).

Students with disabilities have individualized education plans that dictate their learning with modifications for instruction and testing accommodations that are determined by the student’s IEP team. If these students have individualized plans, could they have individualized assessments as well to more accurately measure their progress?

Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

- R1. To what extent does self-concept compare to academic growth?
- R2. How do student's view current standardized assessment practices?
- R3. How do teacher's view current standardized assessment practices?

Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study

The conceptual framework for this study includes perception of academic achievement, perception of standardized assessments, and the student's own self-concept towards academics. It was examined if cognitive test anxiety was being experienced by the special education students that participated in this study. For example, "research reveals that students usually worry about their academic achievement and educational future, and anxiety comes from problems in learning and school demands" (Christie & MacMullin, 1998; Hui, 2001; Kong, Westwood, & Yuen, 2006, p. 22). The success of a student at a young age becomes the foundation of his or her success as an adult. For example, Pickering (2010) went on to explain that NCLB must have had a negative impact on student motivation and stated, "it promotes competition, overloads students on yearly testing, begins testing programs at a ridiculously young age, encourages comparisons, and had definitely increased student fear of failure" (2010, ,p. 33).

The U.S. Department of Education was pushing school districts to be accountable for showing not only progress, but mastery of core content standards. Currently, state assessments were being used to determine student mastery of content area standards designated by each student's grade level. All students, regardless of having a learning disability, were required to show mastery of the common core content standards. This

will not only affect the teacher's evaluation, but also more pressure was being put on each student. As if being pressured to learn and remember content area material were not enough, now students with disabilities may be feeling more pressure from their teachers to show mastery on state standardized tests. Some states have begun including student progress in each individual teacher's performance evaluation. For instance, in the state of New Jersey (2012), Governor Christie mandated that student progress will be part of each teacher's yearly evaluation. If a teacher's students fail to show progress, it will be negatively recorded on his or her performance evaluation (NJDOE, 2012, para. 20). The standardized assessments, which are not aligned to each disabled student's academic functioning level that was dictated by the IEP, may not show accurate progress.

Differentiation of individualized education plans is important because each student may require different services and needs depending on their disability. For instance, "the research evidence shows important variations in relation to the type of behavioral difficulty; the type of language difficulty; the effect of other factors, including academic ability (e.g., literacy) and self-concept; the person making the determination of behavioral difficulties, typically a parent or teacher; and the age of the child" (Lindsay, Dockrell, Nippold, and Fugiki, 2012, p. 445). Since students' self-concept can be impacted by educational decisions being made by people who are familiar with particular students, how can students with disabilities' self-concept be impacted by decisions made by individuals that are unfamiliar with large student populations and the various sub group of students, such as students with disabilities that make up part of the population. This was an issue that needed to be examined to determine if there was a relationship between

standardized assessments and the self-concept of students with learning and/or behavioral disabilities.

Conducting a qualitative study allowed data related to the research questions and hypotheses of this study to be collected and analyzed. Additionally, including two different groups in the study (special education students, special and general education teachers) gave a comprehensive picture of whom and to what extent people are affected by NCLB assessment practices.

This study was significant because mandated standardized assessments affect the academic self-concept of students with disabilities. It was not known to what degree state standardized assessments affect the self-concept of students with disabilities. Low achievement happens because students with disabilities take assessments on content and standards they may not have been exposed to if they are not being instructed on their age-equivalent grade level. For instance, a third-grade student who is functioning on a first-grade level may not be able to complete a multiplication problem on a third-grade math assessment. Although it is appropriate for third-grade students to master this skill, students with disabilities may not be at that level but may currently be working on other goals below that grade level. It was important to explore and determine if students with disabilities were affected by assessment practices mandated by NCLB. Since the law was implemented in 2002, the significance and influence on students with disabilities was unknown.

Nature of the Study

In order to carry out this study, a qualitative research design was utilized. The first step in conducting a qualitative research design was identifying a problem: Does

standardized assessments have an impact on the self-concept of students with disabilities as perceived by special education students and both general and special education teachers. Bouck (2007) points out that, NCLB has some merit and Katsiyannis, Zhang, Ryan, and Jones (2007) believe that, “the mandate may need modifications in order to serve all students appropriately” (Bouck, 2007, p.79; Katsiyannis, Zhang, Ryan, and Jones, 2007, p. 160). According to Bouck (2007), NCLB has “laudable goals, such as ensuring that every child has a highly qualified teacher, schools hold teachers accountable for student learning through the use of frequent assessments, and teachers employ evidence-based practices” (2007, p. 79). Katsiyannis, Zhang, Ryan, and Jones (2007) pointed out that, “given the potential negative consequences these assessments have for all stakeholders (i.e., students, parents, and schools), participation of students with disabilities in these assessments are controversial” (2007, p. 160). For instance, under the mandate, students with special needs were required to take the standardized assessment that’s appropriate for their age rather than functioning level. In other words, the AYP of special needs students may not be measured appropriately. The study was predicated on four research questions. The types of data that were collected to answer the research question were questionnaires and interviews. Questionnaires were distributed to special education and general education teachers. Questionnaire questions were structured and answered along a Likert scale. Questions on the questionnaire are located in Appendix B. Interviews consisting of open-ended questions were conducted with randomly selected members of the same groups. Interview questions are available in Appendix C.

Definition of Terms

Several terms are important to this study. As such, the following terms are operationally defined.

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Populations must demonstrate improvement from one year to the next on the standardized assessments administered under NCLB (Hardman, 2006).

Free and appropriate education (FAPE). Refers to a law that provides all students with disabilities from birth to age 21 the same education as their nondisabled peers (Hardman, 2006).

Individualized education plan (IEP). Written for each student who is classified as having a disability, setting forth education goals and modifications.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Outlines the educational rights of students with disabilities (Hardman, 2006).

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Became law in 2001 and was enacted in January 2002 (Stephenson, 2006).

Self-concept. A positive or negative attitude towards one's self.

Test anxiety. A psychological response to avoid failure or a threat to one's knowledge during assessments.

Title I funding. Funding is provided by the federal government to increase the academic achievement of children from low-income families (Shaul, 2006).