

Summer 2016

Alternative Assessment and Accountability: A Case Study of Policy Reform and Teacher Practice at the District Level

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ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY: A CASE STUDY
OF POLICY REFORM AND TEACHER PRACTICE AT THE DISTRICT
LEVEL

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY
August 2016

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ABSTRACT

ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY: A CASE STUDY OF POLICY REFORM AND TEACHER PRACTICE AT THE DISTRICT LEVEL

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Old Dominion University, 2016
Director: Brandon Butler

Deliberations on the topic of alternatives to standardized assessments spurred the 2014 Virginia General Assembly legislation (House Bill 930/Senate Bill 306) that removed five, end-of-year Virginia Standards of Learning tests from select elementary and middle school subjects and supplant them with alternative measures (Virginia Department of Education, 2014). In light of the reform, the purpose of this study was to develop a descriptive account of one large Virginia school district's implementation of alternative, locally developed assessments designed as an intervention to enhance teaching and learning. Emphasis was on the impact of policy change in social studies practice to capture teachers' perceptions of alternative assessment in relation to teaching and learning. Specifically, this study examined, "How does reform focused on alternative assessment influence: (a) teachers' perceptions, and (b) educational practice?" A theoretical framework, adapted from Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), offered a conceptual stance through which to view the formed relationships between educational systems (i.e., state, district, and classroom) acting upon student learning. Using phenomenological analysis within case study, this study followed sixth/seventh grade social studies teachers and district leaders through their enactment of performance-based tasks as formative means of assessment. Through extensive individual and focus group interviews, classroom observations, and document/artifact analysis, the ways in which alternative assessment reform influenced teachers' perceptions and educational practice were uncovered. Main findings from the study

revealed (1) participants' lived experiences in making the transition from an old to a new assessment accountability system; (2) the establishment of "common ground" between district leaders and teachers through supportive interventions (i.e., professional development); and (3) the development of teachers' responsive teaching that linked assessment accountability to practice. Discussion focuses on bridging the gap between assessment policy reform and educational practice with regard to the scaffolds and interventions provided for teachers. Suggestions for social studies educators, district leaders, and state policymakers focus on the growing demand for pedagogy that best supports the practice of alternative assessment.

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This dissertation is dedicated to all those who set out to enact
the changes they wish to see in education.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are individuals I need to acknowledge as contributors to the successful completion of this dissertation. To my dissertation chair, Dr. Brandon Butler, thank you for serving as my mentor and leading me through this process. You broadened my horizons in research and scholarship – to publish and present my work, collaborate with faculty, and extend my services throughout the research and university communities – in order to experience the workings of academia. More importantly, you saw my true capabilities during the most challenging moments and always demanded my best. To my dissertation committee members, Dr. Jamie Colwell and Dr. Steve Myran, thank you for your expertise in the areas of literacy and assessment, and for supporting me through my comprehensive exam, proposal defense, and the dissertation phase. I have learned so much from all of you, and will be forever grateful for the time you invested in my professional and scholarly development.

I also need to recognize my parents for the lessons they instilled in me as a child that have had a lasting impact on my life. To my father, Frank, thank you for seeing the teacher in me, even before I did, and inspiring me to hone my gifts and talents in the field of education. To my mother, Leann, thank you for imparting the courage and tenacity required to embark on this challenging journey. You have both taught me to always set my sights high and remain committed to my areas of passion.

Finally, to my husband, David, thank you for your unwavering support and unconditional love. You have been the wind in my sail each and every day through this four-year journey. With you by my side, I realize anything is possible. You pushed me to be the best version of myself, and for that, I will be eternally grateful.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	ix
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT: PAST AND PRESENT	5
EDUCATION AS A COMPLEX SYSTEM	7
THE PROBLEM.....	9
OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS	14
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW	18
ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORETICAL MODEL	18
THE HISTORY OF ASSESSMENT.....	24
POLICY AT THE STATE LEVEL.....	29
ENACTMENT AT THE LOCAL LEVEL.....	40
IMPLEMENTATION AT THE CLASSROOM LEVEL.....	52
LITERATURE CRITIQUE	76
CHAPTER SUMMARY.....	80
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY	82
CONTEXT: DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION GUIDELINES.....	85
PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS	89
RESEARCH DESIGN	92
THE RESEARCHER.....	96
DATA COLLECTION	98
DATA ANALYSIS.....	116
TRUSTWORTHINESS	136
LIMITATIONS.....	140
CHAPTER SUMMARY.....	143
CHAPTER IV: CONTEXT	145
THE STATE OF VIRGINIA – THE MACROSYSTEM.....	146
THE DISTRICT: LANDSTONE CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS –	
THE EXOSYSTEM.....	148
PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS – KINGSVILLE AND SMITHTOWN	
MIDDLE SCHOOLS: EXOSYSTEM PART II.....	165
THE PARTICIPANTS – THE MICROSYSTEM.....	169
CHAPTER SUMMARY.....	179
CHAPTER V: FINDINGS.....	181
A NEW BEGINNING: INITIAL PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES	182

ESTABLISHING COMMON GROUND THROUGH SUPPORT: TEACHERS AS PARTICIPANTS	206
BRIDGING EPISTEMOLOGIES AND PRACTICE IN LIGHT OF REFORM	231
CHAPTER SUMMARY.....	254
CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION	255
SUMMARY OF THE STUDY.....	256
IMPLICATIONS FOR ASSESSMENT REFORM AT THE STATE LEVEL ..	259
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DISTRICT	264
IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES PRACTICE IN THE CLASSROOM	271
IMPLICATIONS FOR ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT RESEARCH	277
LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS.....	285
CONCLUSIONS.....	285
REFERENCES	290
APPENDICES	
COVER LETTER AND INFORMED CONSENT	308
DEMOGRAPHIC SHEET	314
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL	315
CONTACT SUMMARY SHEET.....	318
FIELD NOTE TEMPLATE.....	319
VITA	320

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
2.1. Characteristics of Empiricist and Constructivist Viewpoints	58
2.2. NCSS Framework of Qualities of Powerful and Authentic Social Studies	74
3.1. Data Collection Points	102
3.2. Data Collection Timeline	103
3.3. Observational Record of Behaviors and Critical Requirements	112
3.4. Documents and Artifacts Collected from the Educational Environments	115
3.5. Case Study Analysis Sample: Seventh Grade Observation Data.....	121
3.6. Single Participant: Initial Codes and Categories	132
3.7. Multiple Participants: Initial Codes and Categories	134
3.8. Transforming Categories into Themes.....	135
4.1. Middle School Climate Survey Data	153
4.2. Curricular Units: Sixth and Seventh Grade Social Studies.....	155
4.3. Qualities of Powerful and Authentic Social Studies	161
5.1. The 12 Literary Defense Strategies.....	245

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
2.1. Educational Environments Theoretical Model.....	19
2.2. Literature Review Map.....	24
2.3. Comparison of Philosophical Beliefs and Theoretical Assumptions of Traditional and Alternative Assessment	39
2.4. Formative Assessment Cycle	54
3.1. Methodology Framework: Phenomenology and Case Study Analyses	83
3.2. Data Collection Timetable	107
3.3. Case Study Descriptive Framework.....	120
3.4. Phenomenological Analysis Cycle.....	126
4.1. The Superintendent's Executive Summary.....	149
5.1. The Writer's Checklist for Seventh Grade Summative Assessments	202
5.2. Achieve 3000 Panama Canal Lesson	220
5.3. Performance Task Persuasion Map	241

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Testing and assessment accountability measures are traditionally viewed as catalysts of change in the United States (Linn, 2000). Within the past century, reform initiatives on how to best prepare students for citizenship, the workforce and higher education have occurred through revisions to curriculum frameworks, standards and instructional ideologies (Kliebard, 2004; Schiro, 2013). For example, the most recent federally supported state policy reform effort, the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association-NGA & Council of Chief State School Officers-CCSSO, 2010), stressed the revision of curricular goals that reflect the skills (i.e., problem-solving, evaluation, design, and communication) that best prepare students for workforce and college demands (Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2010). This state of heedfulness drives the need for reinforcing 21st century skills that are in consistent demand in today's technologically evolving society. With a full range of higher-order skills and processes, and broad, rich standards, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) aim for international advancement and for the United States to stay in stride with leading nations. This initiative calls for movement toward more rigorous, open-ended assessment formats that steer away from our past expectations with standardized measures (Darling-Hammond, 2014). Nonetheless, Sheppard (2008) cautions that traditional, instructional preparation methods geared toward multiple-choice assessment do not guarantee students' ability to successfully transfer content knowledge and into open-ended formats. The same notion holds true for assessing students' engagement with 21st century skill sets.

The latter half of the 20th century embraced several federal policy and educational reforms (Linn, 2000). The 1950s saw the rise of educational tracking, minimum competency

testing in the 1960s and 1970s, the development in the 1980s, and development of school and local district accountability in the 1980s, and concluding in the 1990s with a standards-based reorganization with increased testing. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 spurred the assessment of knowledge and skills that could be easily assessed by multiple-choice format for all student populations (Linn, 2003; Perie & Gong, 2009), and increased accountability in districts with Title I schools that relied on supplemental funding to support economically disadvantaged students (Smith & Szymanski, 2013). According to Linn (2000), test results are visible and recognizable to the general public through numbers, and used as a way to demonstrate educational trends over time (i.e., test scores, achievement gaps). Moreover, policymakers are traditionally drawn to testing as the process is relatively inexpensive compared to alternative interventions, such as program changes that require professional development or reducing class size. Tests of a traditional, multiple-choice format are considered high-stakes “when results are used to make decisions about students, teachers, schools, and/or districts” (Blazier, 2011, p. 1). The term “high stakes” resonates with students, teachers, and administrators, as increases in accountability – with grade retention, school programming, graduation, and open schools – result in increased pressure, and in turn, increased scores (Linn, 2003; Smith & Szymanski, 2013; Solley, 2007).

In 2012, *Primary Sources* published a national poll that indicated educators’ lower levels of support toward standardized testing. Reports of standardized tests serving as ‘Absolutely essential’ or ‘Very important’ at the state level reflected the following (combined results): 31% in Pre-K-5th, 28% in 6th-8th, and 23% in 9th-12th (Scholastic & The Gates Foundation, 2012). This may have been a result of educators’ strong support for formative, ongoing assessments, with 62% reporting it as ‘Absolutely essential’ and an additional 30% reporting ‘Very

important.’ Accountability measures, through a standardized approach, may cause some to question what a 21st century educational system (i.e., standards, curriculum, and assessment) should, or could, look like after moving away from the demands of NCLB.

The previously enacted accountability measures and federal regulations of NCLB were recently supplanted in December of 2015 with a new education law, The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (S.1177) (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2015). On December 10 2015, this law reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Outlined in the law were initiatives to reduce the amount of high-stakes tests, including annual yearly progress sanctions. Each state has autonomy to consider multiple measures of student progress, decide how to include federally required tests into their accountability system, and determine ways to incorporate non-test measures of career and workforce readiness. To further strengthen state and local control with accountability systems, legislators acknowledged the need for collaboration among various educational levels between states, local districts, school leaders, and teachers.

Committed to the future of American education during the 21st century, The Gordon Commission (2013) has drawn attention toward transforming assessment formats to better measure student progress of content knowledge and skill sets. Far too often, external tests have become the “de facto” curriculum across districts and schools. Forward thinking to develop more efficient assessment methods requires recognition of “what we choose to assess is what will end up being the focus of classroom instruction” (p. 9). To best capitalize on the purposes of assessment, results should serve as a guide to inform teaching and learning, specifically with teachers’ planning to gauge student progress through integrated and performance-based measures. Transformations in assessment ought to address the competencies of a rigorous and robust 21st century educational system that reflect an increasingly complex and changing world.

As stated in the commission's *Public Policy Statement*, this is likely to include new (i.e., alternative) assessment formats, teacher training, and an investment in supportive resources.

Forward advancement through the federally supported standards-based reform of CCSS has generated a greater emphasis on content goals as they coincide with instructional practice and assessments that incorporate higher-order thinking skills at the classroom level (Conley, 2014; Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2010). The Common Core standards only address math and language arts standards; therefore, the other core disciplines created supporting standards. In 1994 the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (NCSS), for instance, initially created a set of curriculum standards, or thematic strands, which were later revised in 2010. The intended purpose of their instructional has been to enhance the rigor in social studies teaching, learning, and assessment. Although NCSS as an organization was not aligned with CCSS at its time of inception, today there is a shared vision to enhance higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills through rigorous frameworks teachers' may use with standards and instruction. For instance, NCSS (2013) published *The College, Career & Civic Life (C3) Framework* in response to the Common Core. Such actions addressed the need for students' "intellectual power to recognize societal problems; ask good questions and develop robust investigations into them; consider possible solutions...and communicate and act upon what they learn" (NCSS, 2013, p. 6). This framework moves beyond the boundaries of college and career preparedness to provide resources for social studies teachers on how to plan for inquiry-based teaching and to reinforce civic and democratic principles through informed action and effective communication.

Essentially, within a classroom system exists an interplay between standards, skills sets, and assessment, to which qualitative means can be used to evaluate students' proficiency (Solley, 2007). To that end, a movement toward alternative pedagogical methods is representative of an

approach that takes multiple assessment measures into consideration to support student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2014). Political considerations toward adopting alternative assessment measures are not a phenomenon associated solely with the present, when in fact implementation can be evidenced throughout the past few decades.

Alternative Assessment: Past and Present

State and district-level policy reform has been enacted to shift the focus from traditional means of standardized assessments toward open-ended, performance-based approaches. For example, a three-year project conducted by Khattri, Reeve, and Kane (1998) highlighted California, Connecticut, Maryland, Kentucky, and Oregon, as leaders of the performance-based assessment movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s by implementing open-response formats with high-stakes attached. Specifically, Vermont was attributed as being a leader in the implementation of a portfolio-assessment system for math and writing, followed by reform efforts in Wyoming and Wisconsin to create portfolios and performance tasks (Darling-Hammond et al., 2013). Similarly, Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Missouri implemented locally developed, performance-based assessment systems, which were supplemented with constructed response exam items to provide evidence of students' proficiency of standards (Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2010). I further elaborate in Chapter II on the significance of these states' important work (i.e., successes and challenges) in the area of performance-based, alternative assessment.

Despite states' efforts to evaluate student learning through alternative approaches, significant decline ensued. The opposition responsible for this decline cited high costs, lack of educator support, time, scoring consistency, and criticism of implementation elements. Although teachers made adaptations in their classroom practice to align with policy reform

mandates, success was contingent upon local and state support (i.e., resources and training) (Koretz, Stetcher, & Deibert, 1992; Lane, Stone, Parke, Hansen, & Cerrillo, 2000). An additional factor to consider is a teacher's epistemic framework of teaching and learning (i.e., planning, instruction, and students' ways of knowing) and the impact one's philosophy has in shaping the learning environment (Hennessey, Murphy, & Kulikowich, 2013).

Presently, there is a call to revisit research with policy reform at the state level on the employment of performance-based assessments, specifically designed to assess cognitive growth alongside complex skill sets (Darling-Hammond et al., 2013). Moving beyond previous states' attempts at assessment reform, the Commonwealth of Virginia has recently enacted legislation to counter the accountability measures of NCLB that sought innovation through alternative approaches to assessment. As occurred with other states in the past, there are risks in adopting assessment reform measures for Virginia. However, if the reform is carried out successfully, Virginia may potentially provide a feasible model for other states to follow.

Virginia Legislation: Locally Developed Assessments

Recent deliberations on the topic of alternatives to standardized assessments spurred the 2014 Virginia General Assembly legislation (House Bill 930/Senate Bill 306) to remove five, end-of-year Virginia Standards of Learning tests from select elementary and middle school grades/subjects and supplant them with alternative measures (Virginia Department of Education-VDOE, 2014). Outlined in the State Superintendent's Memo (October 24, 2014), local divisions were encouraged to capitalize on assessments that provide students with innovative opportunities that demonstrate proficiency with concepts, skills, and content knowledge. Although the state of Virginia officially recognizes the term "school division," throughout this study I use the most commonly term "school district" and align with the literature to best represent my work.

In a previous study (Abbott, 2015), I investigated the impact of the Virginia legislation at the local level in the months following the legislation's passage. When confronted with the task of preparing teachers and students for alternative assessments, the school division reported an action plan implemented during the first trial year, the 2014-2015 school year. Central to the study was the variable of "local control" that shifted assessment accountability from the state to individual school divisions. Primary central office personnel were tasked with preparing staff and students for a shift in teaching and assessment, to include integral decisions with curriculum, assessment task design and scoring, and teacher support (e.g., resources and professional development). The results of the study featured the adaptations made to recognize teachers' state of readiness for implementing performance-based assessments with real-world context, designed to assess both content knowledge and skills. Forward thinking toward educational growth was evidenced through a professional development plan, complete with provisions for the practice teachers needed to feel successful with assessment design, classroom implementation, and scoring the tasks through data-driven processes. I further discuss the intricacies of the 2014 Virginia legislation reform in Chapters III and IV.

Education as a Complex System

Scott (2012) argued that the State serves as the grounding of our "freedoms and our unfreedoms," which could be compared to the degree of autonomy in education. When driven by "an authoritarian disregard for the values, desires, and objections of their subjects" there becomes a threat to the well-being of its people (i.e., schools and teachers) whom are left to weigh the benefits of interventions to their costs (p. 7). A focus on the interdependencies within a complex social system like education may be dismissed through a reduction in quality to quantity and the promotion of standardization. However, Scott addresses the litmus test, in

which “the quality of the institution and its product depends on engaging the enthusiastic participation of its people” and the institutional success will be determined by the value and instillation of flexibility, variety, and promotion of diversity (p. 356). The recently adopted Virginia reform strives to diversify assessments through formative efforts and allow local school boards to determine and professional development, although to what degree or level of success is presently unknown.

In a similar vein, Diamond (2012) analyzes the lack of interdependence within the complex system of education. His focus remains on accountability policies that seek to enhance educational outcomes through tighter links between policy and what/how teachers teach. However, the strength of the relationship between the policy, instructional influence and educational outcomes, is uncertain. Diamond explains how adopting a new policy might lead toward the enhancement of rigorous instruction (i.e., content and skills) or practices that adhere to the policy but not necessarily improved student learning. Moreover, reform is typically intended to tighten relationships between the external district and institutional (i.e., school) environments with the “instructional core” of the classroom. In the case of the 2014 Virginia legislation, the variable of “local control” passed down from the state to the local districts was implemented to do just that. However, Diamond posits that due to the complexities of teaching practice, these links may be mediated by multiple factors, such as influences by colleagues, inequities of resources (e.g., highly-qualified staff), instructional methods, and philosophies of educational practice.

Challenges reside in the process of reshaping the formal structures of teaching and learning, to which there are four, top-down levels to systematic educational reform (Labaree, 2010). Referenced at the top of the system is “rhetoric,” serving as the origin of education

policy, complete with agendas and frameworks for reform. The translation of rhetoric takes shape in the next level down, the “formal structure,” representative of district policies, curriculum frameworks, and professional development. The next level “teaching practice” matters most, where “the extent to which these practitioners adapt the content and process of their instruction, both to the principles of reform rhetoric and to the local structure of reform implementation” (p. 111). Student learning is featured at the very core of this system, where the transformation of the learning—what students demonstrate and take away from their classroom experience—is traditionally measured through standardized means (i.e., Standards of Learning). In the following section I present challenges in maintaining the purity of a reform’s intentions as it is enacted across a series of organizational levels.

The Problem

Even with decades of attention placed upon standardized testing, questions of its effects on teaching and learning remain (Kelly, Meuwissen, & Vansledright, 2007; LaBoskey, 2006; Phelps, 2006). For example, at the high school level Nichols and Valenzuela (2013) highlighted students’ testimonials of the detrimental effects high-stakes testing had on their motivation in school. From the state level, political directives are oftentimes passed through the mechanical gears of reform then into the hands of district leaders, running the risk of disparities between sought-after expectations and what teachers end up doing (Cuban, 2013). In other words, Cuban posits that these actions can occur with little attention paid toward what is needed during the transition for accountability purposes and successful classroom implementation. Recognizably, teachers play an influential role in shaping what is taught and learned in the classroom through their pedagogical decisions (Cross, 2009). In Cross’s study, teachers’ perceptions of their subject played a central role in their belief system of classroom practice and student learning.

According to Labaree (2010), impacting factors such as the diversity in teaching ideologies can create the most challenges for district and school leaders overseeing and managing the effects of reform intended to impact student learning. For these reasons, the focus and data collection of this study reside in the district and classroom levels. Analyzing such educational environments requires a distant glance to recognize the numerous external factors that bare attention.

Although my initial study captured the response plan of central office personal that met legislative terms, investigation at the classroom level (i.e., microsystem) was left unattended. Documentation of teachers' perceptions of the legislation, alongside their instructional practices that attend to alterative assessments, was suggested for future findings. In this study, I capitalize on the opportunity to further this initiative and fill previous gaps in understanding.

The purpose of this research is to develop a systematic account of one large Virginia school district's implementation of alternative, locally developed assessments designed to supplant standardized measures. There is synthesis required in understanding the intricacies involved in transforming teacher practice in relation to alternative assessment. Moreover, this study focuses on student-centered, educational practices that move students away from traditional standardized tests (i.e., SOLs). After the inception of state Standards of Learning (SOL) tests in 1998, teachers adapted their instruction and assessment based on the accountability associated with standardized testing (Morrill, 2004). Now confronted with the task of preparing students for intermittent, performance-based assessments, the aim is to document how adaptations are made within the district of "Landstone City Public Schools" (pseudonym) and how the policy reform impacted teachers' practice. This research is timely as the decisions and actions implemented during the beginning months of the first full, 2015-2016 school year, are reported. The research question is as follows:

- How does reform focused on alternative assessment influence: (a) teachers' perceptions, and (b) educational practice?

To investigate the problem I frame my research through a theoretical framework that features three-levels of educational reform (i.e., state, district, classroom) that ultimately impact the most essential layer of student learning. The framework is supportive of a constructivist paradigm in which meaning emerges from the interrelations between the four educational environments. Specifically, this model is designed in the context of the 2014 Virginia legislation and is used to hypothesize the ways in which policy decisions and stakeholders' beliefs with alternative assessment influence student learning. Chapter II provides further elaboration and additional details regarding the theoretical framework that structures the research.

For this study, I relied on a framework that used phenomenological analysis within a case study design to investigate the actions and experiences of educational stakeholders at varying levels. Serving as *the case* under investigation is a tightly bound group of select stakeholders, the district leaders and 6th/7th grade social studies teachers, within one large Virginia school district (i.e., Landstone) who are responsible for the enactment of the state reform. In support, phenomenological analysis was used to capture the variance of voices and lived experiences representative of the teachers and central office personnel (i.e., participants) of whom are featured within the case (Moustakas, 1994). To best suit my role as the researcher, "bridling" served as a reflexive process (Vagle, 2009), mainly to document questions pertaining to my experiences and assumptions related to the phenomenon of alternative assessment implementation. Moreover, the developed objectivity and open-mindedness upon entering each phase of the study provided for substantive reporting of phenomenological experiences.

In this study I use social studies as the context of investigation because this discipline served as the academic subject most impacted by the Virginia legislation in more than half of the five areas. To further recognize the legislation's impact at the classroom level (i.e., teaching practice), middle school social studies teacher voices were exclusively captured to help answer my research question. With regard to data collection, increased confirmability was enacted through the convergence of findings from multiple data sources for triangulation purposes (Yin, 2014). Specifically, data collection occurred mainly through ongoing individual and focus group interviews with 6th and 7th grade teachers as a means to capture their voices and lived experiences regarding the implementation of alternative assessment reform. Focus group interviews with central office personnel were also conducted as a follow-up measure to the Abbott (2015) study to investigate changes over time with regard to alternative assessment development, enactment, and support. Field observations during teacher planning sessions, classroom instruction, and professional development workshops supported interview findings to provide a more holistic understanding. Interviews and observations were conducted in their natural settings to provide a foundation of authenticity, security, and trust. Finally, patterns that emerged from document analysis of district resources, locally developed performance-based tasks and rubrics, and professional development training materials, were used to support the intent and effectiveness of implementing alternative assessments as a whole.

Presently, there is a limited amount of contemporary literature and research available that features investigations of the relationship between state policy reform and educational practice at the district level. Utilizing qualitative research methodology with this contemporary topic adds to the existing body of knowledge and further contribute understanding of the extent in which state policy can extensively alter teachers' practice and beliefs. Central throughout this study is

the critical analysis of the role of alternative assessment, intended for use as a mechanism to enhance education on several fronts (Virginia Department of Education, 2014).

Significance of the Study: From the Researcher's Perspective

It is with full transparency that I disclose my primary interest in this study – the role of alternative assessment as an intervening measure to enhance student learning in an evolving 21st century society. In particular, I question what this intervention might look like, sound like, and feel like in practice through the shared accountability among various stakeholders at the local level. At the forefront of this study is an element of novelty, as this is likely one of the first comprehensive, empirical studies conducted on this important topic since the 2014 legislation was enacted. Taking a closer look at division leaders' and social studies teachers' responses to the reform reveals a greater understanding and awareness with how accountability measures have taken shape at the district and classroom levels. It is through the case study approach that documented decisions, communications, artifacts, practices and perceptions from participants provide insight to the extent in which there is alignment with the guidelines set in place by the VDOE.

My investigation and reporting of the particulars surrounding the phenomenon could bring a broader understanding to an audience of educational stakeholders at various levels. As this study may serve as a platform for sharing contemporary data at-large with district and building-level audiences, there is potential for significant gains that exceed such boundaries. For example, findings not only outline the intricacies of a single school division's action plan for the enactment of alternative assessment, but they draw attention to the VDOE's initiatives to invest in student learning and teachers' professional growth. Results may potentially serve as the catalyst among broader state audiences for alternative assessment adoption as a reform initiative.

Notably, the topic of performance-based assessment reform at the state level has begun to find voice once again. In the end, indications are presented as to whether or not student learning can thrive through alternative means, as opposed to traditional standardized measures.

Overview of Chapters

Over the past century, reform initiatives with curriculum, standards, and instructional ideologies have traditionally been implemented to best prepare students for an evolving society (Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2010; Kliebard, 2004; Shiro, 2013). From the reform of NCLB that aimed to assess content knowledge through multiple-choice formats (Linn, 2000; Linn 2003), to more recent attempts with CCSS focused on college and career readiness skills (NCSS, 2013), assessments have served as a catalyst for educational change. A more recent attempt is evidenced by the 2014 Virginia legislation that removed five state SOL tests in select elementary and middle school grades/subjects, to be supplanted with alternative measures (VDOE, 2014). Significantly, the power of local control enabled each school district to make respective decisions that would best service their division (i.e., staff and students).

A top-down approach with policy reform designed to reshape teaching and learning in the classroom can be problematic, especially when considering the diversity of teachers' philosophies as an impacting factor (Cuban, 2013; Labaree, 2010). Therefore, the theoretical framework features the four-levels of educational reform and offer a conceptual stance through which to view the formed relationships between educational systems acting upon student learning (Labaree, 2010). In response to the 2014 Virginia legislation, this study addresses the ways in which varied educational environments focus on the implementation of alternative assessment as an intervention. Emphasis remains on the extent to which assessment policy

reform impacts educational practice at the local level, with an up-close analysis of how teachers' perceptions and beliefs with alternative assessment inform their practice.

Chapter II highlights the contextual variables bounded within the complexities of 21st century schooling related to the overarching topics of policy reform, teacher's epistemic belief systems, alternative assessment formats, and best pedagogical practices in social studies instruction. Woven throughout are the supportive measures that bridge policy reform with educational practice. Furthermore, I offer an empirical and theoretical knowledge base that describes the role of alternative assessment in student learning as it is used to assess cognitive knowledge and engagement in higher-order processes and skills (e.g., critical thinking and problem-solving). The Education Environments theoretical framework serves as a guide while each level (i.e., environment) is broken-down to provide greater depth of understanding on the shared influences of student learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In Chapter III I revisit the educational environments at the state, local district, and classroom levels that draw particular attention to the phenomenon of enacting the 2014 legislation. For context purposes, I begin with a summary of the pertinent details related to the 2014 Virginia legislation outlined in the State Superintendent's memo. Next, I offer a detailed historical account of the two qualitative research traditions, case study and phenomenology, used to capture the voices and lived experiences of Landstone City Public School stakeholders. I transition into the methodology of the study, particularly as it pertains to the framework of phenomenological and case study analyses that capture participants' adaptations to the state's alternative assessment reform. Sections are dedicated to the study's participants (i.e., district leaders and 6th/7th grade social studies teachers), procedure, data collection, and data analysis processes. This study's qualitative approach draws from multiple data sources through

individual and focus group interviews, observations, and the analysis of documents/artifacts. I conclude by featuring multiple trustworthiness strategies for validity and credibility purposes.

In Chapter IV I provide an in-depth analysis of Landstone City Public Schools for a broader context for the study, particularly as a means to outline the division's strategic goals and instructional plans. Document analysis findings from seminal district resources are revealed, followed by matrices and descriptions of the 6th/7th grade alternative assessments. I summarize the main points of the district-level professional development designed to aid in social studies teachers' enactment of the alternative assessment in their respective classrooms. Lastly, I feature primary participants' biographies to provide greater insight into their epistemic beliefs and how they manifest through their practices. These provisions provide the necessary context that set the stage for the subsequent chapters on findings and discussion.

Chapter IV explores the findings that emerged from the in-depth investigation of alternative assessment reform enacted during the 2015-2016 school year. I present three themes through a comprehensive description of the enactment of alternative assessment reform at the district and classroom levels: (1) A New Beginning: Initial Perceptions and Practices; (2) Establishing Common Ground through Support: Teachers as Participants; (3) Perceptions and Responsive Practice in the Midst of Reform. Each theme is related to the research question driving the research study: How does reform focused on alternative assessment influence (a) teachers' perceptions, and (b) educational practice? The phenomenological nature of the research served as a platform to share the lived educational experiences and voices of district leaders and middle school social studies teachers as they experienced the phenomenon at hand. Alongside the interrelatedness between the emergent themes, research question, and theoretical

framework, I provide my bridling insights as a backdrop to illuminate the realities of participants' encounters which occurred in real time and in natural settings.

Chapter VI features discussion points related to the existing literature and the study's findings featured in Chapter V. These essential ideas bridge the gap between assessment policy reform and educational practice with regard to the scaffolds and interventions provided for social studies teachers. Significant attention is drawn to what the findings suggest about the role of alternative assessment as it pertains to policy reform, accountability, and educational practice. Significantly, I draw attention to the implications for state policymakers, district leaders, and social studies educators in their efforts to address the growing demand for pedagogy that best support the 21st century learner. Concluding thoughts address the need for broader research to attain contemporary findings on the topic of alternative assessment reform in the 21st century.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In Chapter I, I presented a common problem that exists among states and districts when confronted with assessment policy reform – determining how and why adaptations are made to comply with the state’s demands, and considering how reform changes impact teachers’ practice. The first chapter also offered a glimpse at a theoretical stance that best explains the factors that impact student learning from a myriad of sources.

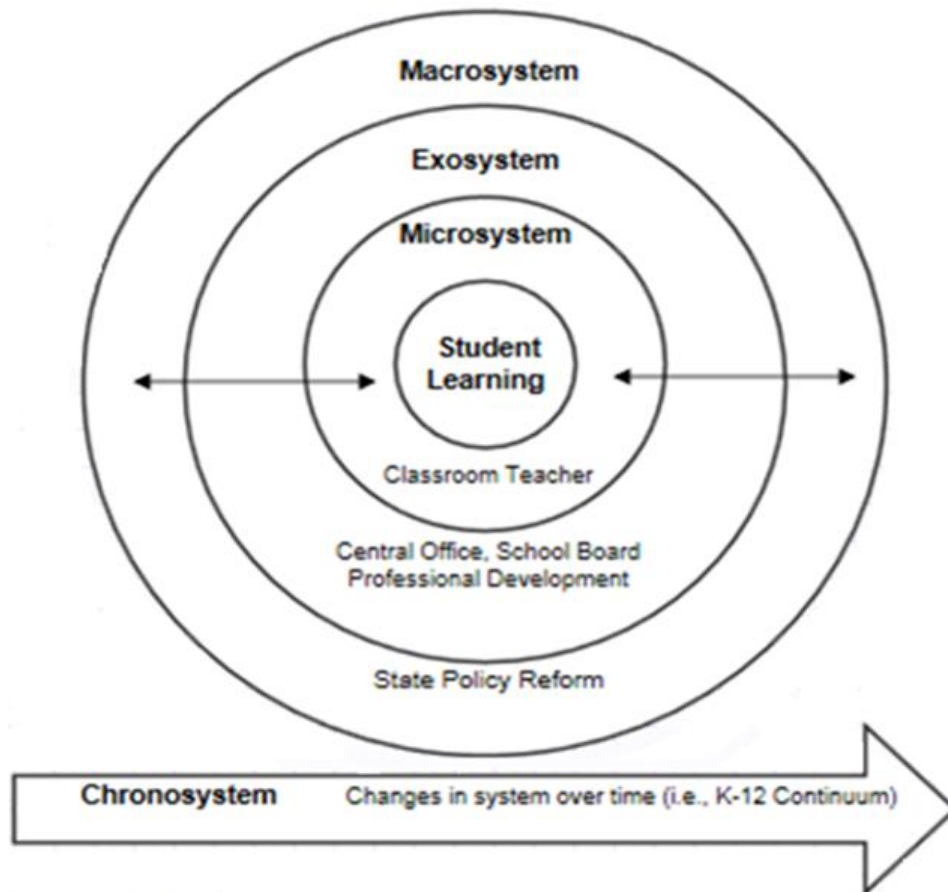
In this chapter, I organize the review of the literature thematically in accordance with the Educational Environments theoretical framework (see Figure 2.1 on the next page) as a means to synthesize the literature from both empirical and theoretical fronts. Within each of the four educational environments I draw attention to the complexities of schooling. Each environment is unique with players in distinct “ecological niches,” with respective forms of language and communication, resources/tools, and organizational successes and challenges (Labaree, 2010, p. 110). Furthermore, I address the need for a deeper understanding of the impacts policy reform has on teacher practice (Nichols & Valenzuela, 2013), paying particular attention to how the effects of policy reform work across state, local district, and classroom levels.

Ecological Systems Theoretical Model

The impact of policy reform on students’ academic development cannot be analyzed in isolation. Instead, it must be considered within the system of surrounding environments through which it is fostered (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Adapted from Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), and the four-levels of educational reform (Labaree, 2010), the Educational Environment Theoretical Model in Figure 2.1 examines student cognition under the influence of particular contextual variables. Similar to Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory

Model, the developing individual rests at the center of my model, undergoing exploration and analysis.

Figure 2.1 Educational Environments Theoretical Model



(Adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

The Educational Environments Theoretical Model presents the student, serving as the potentially active learner engaged with alternative assessment, to which all surrounding layers directly impact his or her progression. Outside the centerpiece is the microsystem that contains proximal processes, or the more complex interactions within the immediate learning environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). In this case, the classroom serves as the learning environment in which the individual most frequently interacts with teachers(s) and peers, but also remains a place in which patterns of activities are evidenced (i.e., instruction) and interpersonal relationships can be

observed (i.e., teacher and student). The exosystem is the next layer out, to which the developing individual is not an active participant; however, events within this level are directly impactful on the other framework components (i.e., microsystem, the student). In my model, the exosystem is represented by the local school district (i.e., central office personnel and local school board), tasked with the decision-making and carrying out the state's policy reform, as well as providing professional development for classroom teachers that regularly interact with the student. The macrosystem is the layer furthest away from the center and evolves over time. This level can reflect cultural, academic, and political values that members of the other layers typically share or have in common. The macrosystem in my model represents the overarching political culture, representative of the VDOE and the 2014 legislation, acting upon the conditions of the classroom environment in particular. Lastly, policy reform serves as the variable working across all layers, connecting the state with district leaders and ultimately, classroom teachers.

A decade after the Ecological Systems Theory Model's inception, Bronfenbrenner (1989) updated the model by acknowledging the necessity for the chronosystem, representing the element of extended time. Instead of looking at a single moment, Bronfenbrenner took into account both constancy and change as they pertain to the individual within the context of a developmental environment. In my model, the chronosystem represents the long-term analysis of the student's transitions in the classroom while experiencing the dynamics of assessment. More specifically, this layer represents the broader dimension of "changes" in assessment policy and protocols that impact a student's progression along the K-12 continuum.

Ideologies of education begin with the outermost concentric circle, the macrosystem (i.e., rhetoric), representing the political environment in which reform originates, and works its way inward toward the student. Although the Virginia reform is specific to time and place along the

continuum, and my attention is paid toward the specific location in which students experience the enacted reform, the student's previous assessment experiences are of particular importance in this research.

Applications of Bronfenbrenner's Model

Bronfenbrenner (1979) originally intended for the model to serve a purpose of analyzing student development; however, the model has since been used in areas outside this realm. Nonetheless, the applications of overlapping environments to show impact on whatever is at the heart of the model has remained intact over time. Contemporary uses of the model within the past three years reflect a variety of research fields, such as science, health, counseling, and psychology, and have relied on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory model to analyze relationships across concepts or environments. More broadly, Onwuegbuzie, Collins, and Frels (2013) used Bronfenbrenner's model to discuss how quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods studies could be conducted as "four-level research" (i.e., micro-research, meso-research, exo-research, and macro-research). Specifically, their work bounds the inquiry within the conceptual/theoretical framework so that "researchers can make within-level generalizations and/or across-level generalizations" (p. 6). In education, Guckin and Minton (2014) relied on the ecological model to further explore the issue of bullying and to understand its effects on school-aged victims, mainly Irish children. The model was suggested as a tool to assist counselors in analyzing the interrelatedness between culture-specific and academic environments. Similar to my framework, Nichols and Valenzuela (2013) studied the relationships between educational policy and practice, mainly the threats of high-stakes testing pressures on high school students' motivation. Starting broad with the testing culture, the model is broken down into the environments of teachers, principals, and students to study how relationships evolve over time.

The Educational Environments Theoretical Model

While the idea of ‘student as learner’ sits at the center of the theoretical model, the purpose of this study is to analyze how the varying educational environments (macrosystem, exosystem, and microsystem) develop relationships as they shape student learning. It is necessary to note that analysis of student learning as a variable remains outside the scope of this research study. Specifically, the model draws attention to the salient relationships between the educational environments:

- State Legislation (macrosystem) (i.e., 21st century policy reform) and District Leaders (i.e., superintendent, school board, central office personnel) = ongoing communication, accountability;
- State/District Leaders and Classroom Teachers (exosystem) = provisions of professional development, resources, and training;
- School Leaders and Classroom Teachers (microsystem) = support with implementation; facilitation; and
- Classroom Teachers and Students (microsystem) = epistemologies of teaching and learning; formative assessment and feedback.

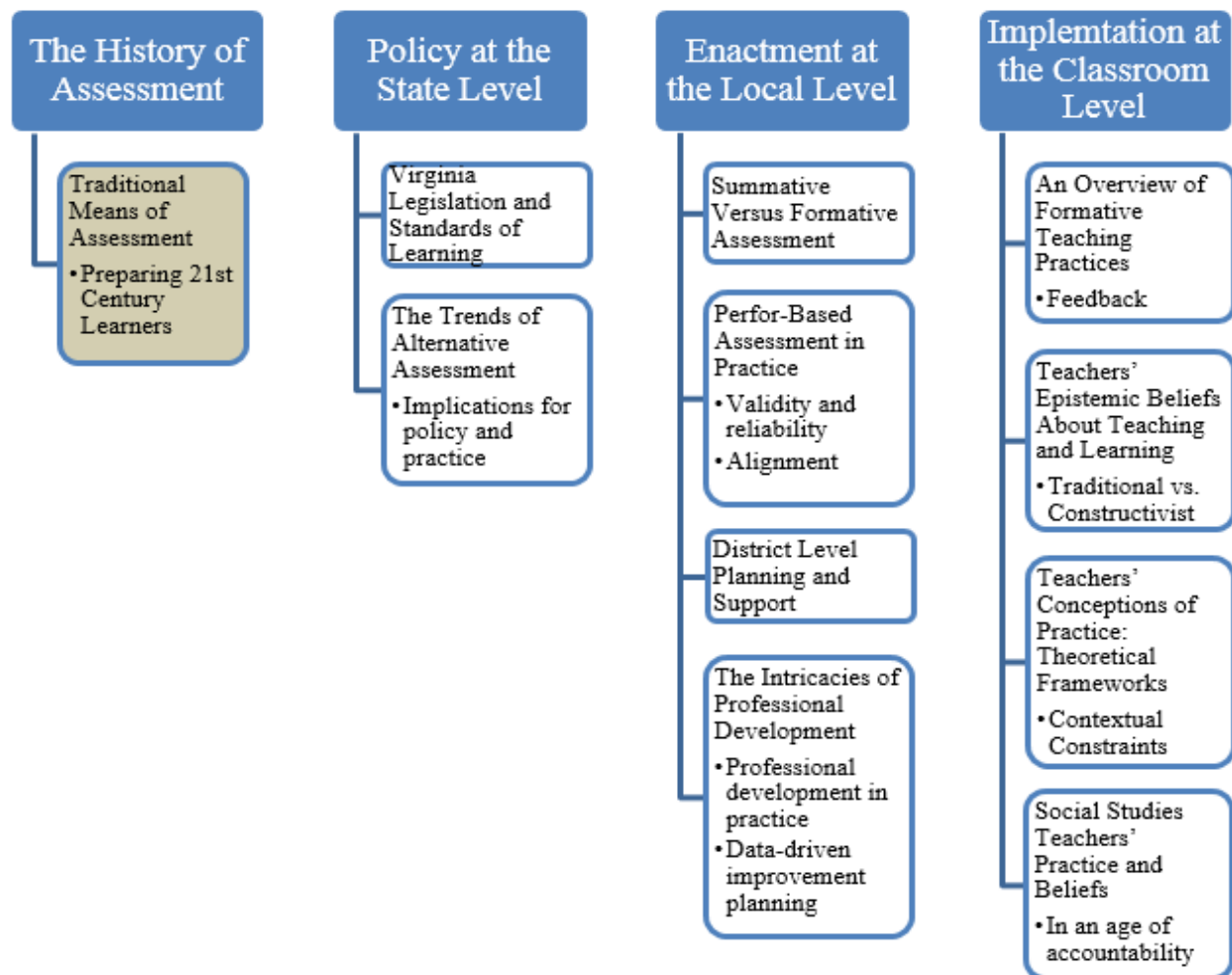
Upon the landscape of state policy reform, the numerous stakeholders aforementioned in the macrosystem, exosystem, and microsystem layers, serve in various roles and capacities to carry out the reform with fidelity. The Educational Environments Theoretical Model is used to feature the complexities of these layers as accountability changes hands in a top-down approach (i.e., state, district, classroom). Notably, Labaree (2010) calls attention to the significant impact teaching ideologies can have on students’ learning environment (i.e., chronosystem); therefore, stakeholders should consider what this could mean for a student changing teachers anywhere

from one to four or more times each year over the course of his or her educational upbringing. Because this literature review is structured around the theoretical model, these complex relationships are revisited periodically through both a historical and contemporary lens with greater depth and detail.

The propositions of the phenomenon in this study – the implementation of alternative assessment in response to the 2014 Virginia legislation – bring forth key issues that are worthy of examination. Throughout the review these are addressed as the conditions and known factors featured from the literature that impact the effectiveness of student learning. Upon looking at policy reform and practice from afar, trends and patterns on the topic of assessment have been illuminated. An up-close critical analysis has led to the identification of literature gaps, in addition to complimentary and contrasting perspectives, to view alternative assessment through a new lens focused on the phenomenon.

The literature review map featured below in Figure 2.2 outlines the main and sub-topics featured in Chapter II that involve the role of alternative assessment as it relates to both policy reform and teacher practice. There is a flow between overarching topics that are connected by their influence on student learning. Main topics start broad then filter into specific areas worthy of attention as they relate to the research study at hand.

Figure 2.2 Literature Review Map



The History of Assessment

At the heart of assessment is the goal to improve teaching and learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Cizek, 2010; Hattie & Timperley 2007). Recognizably, each year districts, schools, and teachers are charged with the difficult task of disaggregating an abundance of data in order to generate plans to improve educational practice (Wayman, Jimerson, & Cho, 2012). Arguments regarding traditional versus alternative means of assessment continue to cycle within the debate of how students should be assessed. After 20 years of a systematic, multiple-choice approach to assess course standards, such debate prompted Virginia to experiment with alternative

assessment reform. To gain a better understanding of the rationale driving Virginia's actions, a comparison of old versus new philosophies is valuable.

Policy reform pressures on the state and local level – from initiatives such as No Child Left Behind (2001), Race to the Top (2009), and Common Core State Standards (2010) for example – are accompanied by the belief that policy change will improve student learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Cuban, 2013). From a traditional standpoint, educational reformers have viewed school as “a publically controlled and publically funded enterprise,” motivated to improve society through means of attaining “democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility” (Labaree, 2010, p. 106). Furthermore, educational reform efforts since the mid-twentieth century include initiatives with tracking, minimum competency testing, local district accountability, and notably, an increase in standardized testing (Linn, 2000). The more current mission of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) shifted the nation's attention toward increased accountability for all populations, with reliance on a multiple-choice format to assess content knowledge and skills (Linn, 2003; Perie, Marion & Gong, 2009).

Views and perceptions of the testing debate waver among various stakeholder groups. Labaree (2010) described a consumer agenda with testing as not being focused on enhancing the instructional core, but instead the structuring of the school system and how its accomplishments (i.e., diplomas, test scores) can be used in exchange for the good of society (i.e., jobs). Similarly, Linn (2000) claimed the presentation of numbers to the general public is a recognizable way to demonstrate fluctuations in student learning, while policymakers view testing as relatively inexpensive when compared to alternative means that require professional development or reducing class size. With regard to purpose, Haertel (1999) argued that if multiple-choice assessments were initially intended to serve as “indicators of educational performance” then

perhaps attaining such high scores would not have become “an end in itself” (p. 663). The terms ‘high stakes’ are attached “when [tests] are used to make decisions about students, teachers, schools, and/or districts” with regard to incentives and sanctions (Blazier, 2011, p. 1). Such terms resonate among these populations with grade promotion and graduation, job security, school programming, and open schools, to which increased accountability is intended to produce favorable scores (Linn, 2003; Nichols & Valenzuela, 2013; Smith & Szymanski., 2013; Solley, 2007). Within some state accountability systems, teachers in content area such as science, history, and the arts have requested state testing in their areas to draw greater attention toward the subject (Linn, 2003). Although there are some positive effects from standardized testing for public education, the majority resulted in unintended consequences (Blazier, 2011). For example, a significant number of schools reduced instructional time in subjects such as history and arts programming in order to buy more time and resources for mathematics and English (Grey, 2010). Moreover, the overshadowing, negative effects of accountability oftentimes push aside thoughtful and meaningful classroom practices leaving higher-order thinking and conceptual understanding in jeopardy (Shepard, 2008). These realities prompted me to examine teachers’ experiences and perceptions of their practice during the preparation and delivery of traditional, standardized testing (i.e., the old approach).

Preparations for 21st Century Learning

More recently, conversations regarding pedagogical practices have focused on how to best prepare 21st century learners for college and career readiness. Darling-Hammond (2010) argued for the necessity to move beyond traditional formats of assessment and toward those that incorporate active learning and performance-based assessment in real-world context. The necessity for educational reform in education hinges on her discussions of how countries such as

Finland, South Korea, and Singapore have transformed their educational systems through revisions that support 21st century thinking (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Internationally, curricular reforms in several western countries have led to a transformation in their evaluation methods, which hold implications for new ways of learning through socio-constructivist approaches and authentic learning contexts (Thomas, Deaudelin, Desjardins, & Dezutter, 2011). Attention drawn toward the aforementioned nations' reform initiatives can be used as leverage, specifically to engender conversations regarding enhancement of curriculum, assessment, and instructional methods in the United States. These ideas are seminal in this study, particularly as I analyze the interrelatedness between curriculum, instruction, and assessment in educational practice through a contemporary lens.

On a federal level, advocates of American education reform, The Gordon Commission (2013) highlight the need to form "critical relationships" between standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment to move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach in education. In doing so, personalized learning is instilled through meaningful feedback for teachers and students. The commission calls to policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels for freedom to explore innovative policy reform changes with accountability and assessment. Reformation of an educational system, one with a student-centered focus and a vision to best prepare 21st century learners, ought to consider the needs of teachers while transitioning with their practice. A sustained plan of support should offer opportunities for active learning and the sharing of collegial professional knowledge (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). In relation to this study, similar intentions for the professional enhancement of teachers' practice undergird the Virginia 2014 assessment reform (VDOE, 2014).

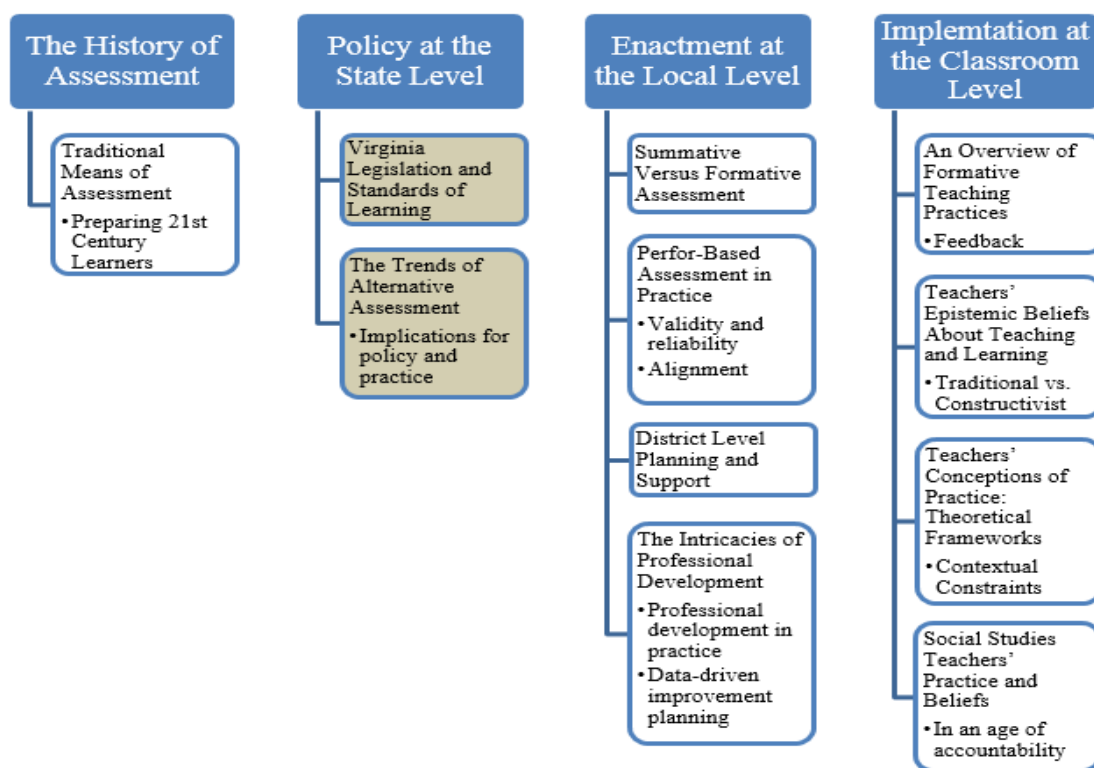
Following a decade of calls for assessment reform, the Common Core State Standards (2010) were enacted through a collaboration among education commissions, content-area experts, state and local education department staff, and numerous stakeholders at the school level (i.e., administrators, teachers, community support groups, parents) (Conley, 2014). Conley argues for the precedence of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in practice to equip all students with the college and career readiness knowledge and skills needed in an evolving society. Highlights of the standards include (1) the focus on conceptual understanding of key concepts to aid in students' transfer across grades and subjects, and (2) academic vocabulary building and non-fiction reading across content areas (i.e., social studies, science, the arts) to assist with interdisciplinary instruction. Moreover, the standards reinforce enhanced student ownership of learning and cognition of the content for future application, versus rote memorization.

As a new paradigm in assessment, one might argue that the essence of the CCSS is representative of best pedagogical practices in general. Embracing such a philosophy requires a different approach toward assessing students' proficiency that focuses on conceptual development and depth of understanding as opposed to the isolation of content and skills (Anderson, 1998). In educational practice, this may require better acquaintance with the knowledge, skills, and processes colleges and careers require, such as those commonly found in performance-based assessments featuring real-world, authentic contexts and problems. Although Virginia does not use CCSS for its official curriculum, I am curious to the extent these new ideologies to equip 21st century learners prompted Virginia's reform, or better yet, district-level stakeholders enacting the reform.

Policy at the State Level

Historically, reform initiatives involving curriculum, standards, and instructional methods have occurred at the national and state levels (Kliebard, 2004; Schiro, 2013). Assessment of student learning has been historically viewed as an effective device for changing the landscape of teachers' practice (Firestone, Mayrowetz, & Fairman, 1998) and to foster school improvement (Herman, 1992). As these factors are embedded into a rationale for alternative assessment reform, the need for accountability with standards does not disappear; instead, a newfound vision with regard to the approaches, formats, and uses of assessment is born.

Figure 2.2 Literature Review Map



Virginia Legislation and Standards of Learning

Each year, Virginia students in grades 3-12 take two or more multiple-choice SOL tests designed for each subject and grade level as competency checks of the current standards

(Morrill, 2004). In the establishment of standards (i.e., national, state, district) a spectrum of specificity can exist within any set, which can create quite the conundrum. If standards are too broad they are difficult to measure, but reasoning can be lost if standards are left too narrow (Kelly, Meuwissen, & Vansledright, 2007).

After the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOLs) were originally adopted in 1995 and revised in 2001, “the Virginia Department of Education produced curriculum frameworks, teacher resource guides, test blueprints, and websites devoted to standards to assist teachers and curriculum developers” (Morrill, 2004, p. 259). Such efforts were made to support teachers’ planning, increase students’ pass scores, and assist in schools’ accreditation. Initial stages of development of the Virginia SOLs were led by four local school districts to seek approval of K-12 standards by the VA Board of Education in core disciplines (i.e., English, mathematics, history and social science, and science) the following year. Various stakeholders in education, such as teachers, parents, administrators, university faculty, and Board of Education members, collaborated to develop the system of standards in just a few months’ time (Morrill, 2004). More recently, a revised 2015 Standards of Learning Curriculum Framework for history and social science was instituted, to reflect changes starting in the 2016-2017 school year (VDOE, 2015).

At the state level, social studies was the most recent subject to be added to the standardized movement, mainly through NCLB initiatives. However, initial attention was first paid to the subject in the 1980s through the implementation of curricular standards, course sequences, and increased testing for accountability (Grant & Salinas, 2008). Grant and Salinas report on the 2004 *Quality Counts* survey that announced roughly 50% of the states mandated standardized testing in social studies. However, slightly less than half of those states had “high stakes” attached to their testing (i.e., teacher jobs, graduation). Regardless, mixed interpretations

of accountability result from inconsistencies across the United States, such as when Michigan reduced the amount of social studies testing, Maine discontinued their tests, and New York shifted to document-based questions for state exams (Grant & Salinas, 2008).

I analyze the notion of teacher accountability as a contextual variable throughout this study due to the concerns surrounding standardized testing with regard to purpose, format, and the sheer number of tests taken each year. In 2007, the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) published a position paper on the topic of standardized testing, stating the following:

We continue to seriously question the need for testing every child in every grade for the remainder of the elementary years...and the ACEI advocates the use of more authentic, alternative assessments that are continuous and intricately embedded in developmentally appropriate classroom instruction (Solley, 2007, p. 35).

For assessments to be their most purposeful, Phelps (2006) asserts that an effective assessment system has (1) information that can be used for diagnosis of students, teachers, and programs; (2) alignment between curriculum and standards for efficiency purposes; and (3) motivation to prepare and attain desired goals. On a broader scale, policymakers should have a predetermined theory of ‘how’ any given assessments will work within the scope of teaching and learning, in addition to ‘what’ the assessments should share with the audience (Perie et al., 2009). Therefore, by unpacking the 2014 Virginia legislation I develop a deeper understanding of the impacts alternative assessments are intended to have within teacher’s instructional planning to ensure students’ proficiency of both content and skills sets. As such, the state outlines a variety of formats each local district has the autonomy to choose from.

Trends of Alternative Assessment

Alternative assessments traditionally feature tasks that represent relevant, real-world application, required for complex thinking, and engage students through a vast array of strategies and methods (i.e., experiments, portfolios, simulations) (Herman, 1992). Herman, Klein, Heath, and Wakai (1994) highlight claims surrounding such assessments, in that “unlike traditional tests, new alternative assessments encourage students to think critically and draw their own conclusions to complex problems” and “these assessments truly stimulate students to engage in complex thinking and thus reflect higher standards of excellence” (p. 6).

Although the enactment of alternative assessment is not a new idea, today’s state and district leaders can look critically at lessons learned from past K-12 settings to bring forth positive change in assessment practices (Abbott, 2015). Interest in alternative assessment measures flourished across the country in the 1980s and 90s during a time in which varying perspectives on instructional delivery and student evaluation began to evolve. Notably, accountability for student learning remained as new formats to assess proficiency of learning targets (i.e., standards) took shape. Understanding how Virginia and local districts might prosper from an alternative assessment approach is conceptualized through my analysis of past state initiatives.

The performance assessment movement. Essential changes in the nature of assessment at the state level occurred throughout the 1990s, to include increases in performance-based assessment (i.e., open-response, hands-on tasks, and portfolios) (Koretz et al., 1992; Stecher, Baron, Chun, & Ross, 2000). Popular among numerous states and local districts was the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) Project—a collaboration among 19 state education departments and engagement with over 30 school districts (Herman, 1992). For example, a sample task in a history class may ask a student to

analyze a series of primary source documents in order to construct an essay around a critical issue on immigration. With over 170 available alternative assessments in its database for collaborative use, the intent was to foster enthusiasm for the movement and encourage new approaches to curriculum, instruction, and assessment in classroom practice. Although the assessment project gained popularity, participating states and districts overall indicated low student performance measures. Teachers lacked knowledge in the development and use of the alternative assessment formats, and lacked instructional skills with complex problem-solving (Herman, 1992). It was concluded that “if assessment is to meet its potential...teachers need substantial training and follow-up support in both suitable assessment techniques and appropriate instructional strategies” (p. 12).

State policy and practice. A prime example of statewide assessment reform was the inception of The Maryland State Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP) (Stone & Lane, 2003). In the early 1990s, MSPAP implemented open-response, performance-based tasks across all core subject areas in grades 3, 5, and 8, with intentions to promote higher quality classroom instruction and assessments. Koretz, Barron, and Keith (1996), in a mixed methods study on the MSPAP during the early years of implementation, indicated that although more than half the teachers were reportedly in favor of the program, high amounts of stress were exuded by the staff. Additionally, principals reported burdens at the state level, to include time spent with management (i.e., record-keeping), staff training, unclear targets, and motivating the staff. Similar in nature was a later study conducted by Lane et al. (2000), involving Maryland elementary and middle school teachers. Although the majority of teachers indicated aligning their instructional activities with the Maryland Learning Outcomes (standards) and MSPAP,

elementary teachers responding more favorably of the program when compared to middle school teachers.

In a comparison of the MSPAP with the Maine Educational Assessment (MEA), Firestone et al. (1998) examined how state policies were locally developed and interpreted. Both states had recently adopted open-response, performance-based assessments with moderate stakes attached. Three times as many Maryland teachers expressed making changes in their teaching based on state tests. Classroom tasks in both states were found to be similar in nature, featuring simulations, the creation of surveys, and experimentation. However, whereas the curriculum in Maryland appeared better-aligned with the tests, Maine teachers had more flexibility and teachers did not feel quite as directed by the assessments. This study prompts my interest in recognizing the impact similar reform might have in this study on social studies teachers' practice at the middle school setting.

Another example of statewide assessment reform at the state level included the California Learning Assessment System (CLAS) Middle Grades Mathematics Performance Assessment, to which students responded to two open-ended tasks with authentic situations, followed by a multiple-choice section (e.g., 8 questions) to assess mathematical cognition (Herman et al., 1994). With regard to the CLAS, Herman and colleagues compared the practice of 8th grade mathematics teachers in suburban, urban, and rural schools. Two-thirds of suburban teachers reported their classroom instruction (i.e., resources, instruction, tasks) as an "excellent" or "OK" alignment with the CLAS, while less than half of urban teachers shared responses in these areas. Furthermore, none of the rural teachers' reporting matched the same amount in either area. However, 83% of rural and 87% of urban teachers were more inclined to continue their engage with mathematical portfolios, as "they are thought to encourage diversity of mathematics work,

including math projects, writing, and investigations” (p. 37). Moreover, these same groups were more likely to engage their students on math tasks that required extended writing tasks and applications with problem-solving. Like Herman and colleagues, I aim to determine the ways in which reform impacts teachers’ interdisciplinary focus with literacy elements (i.e., reading and writing), but instead in the context of social studies.

Enacted in 1991, an initiative through the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) implemented the Kentucky Instructional Reform Information System (KIRIS) which measured four main academic learning targets: (1) communication, (2) conceptual application within core subjects, (3) real-world critical thinking and problem-solving, and (4) and interdisciplinary learning (Stecher, Barron, Kaganoff, & Goodwin, 1998). KIRIS was “high stakes” and performance-based, with constructed responses in most subjects, coupled with portfolios in the subjects of mathematics and writing. Assessment of seven subject areas were assessed across grades 4, 7, and 11 (reading, writing, and math), and 5, 8 and 11 (social studies, arts, and vocational education). Stecher and colleagues (1998) aimed to address the effects of statewide assessment reforms on school structures (i.e., teachers’ practice) and perceptions of assessment.

Across all grades, there was strong evidence to suggest that KIRIS in particular was most influential on teachers’ classroom practice. Remarkably, 67% of math teachers reported an increase in their efforts to administer classroom assessments similar in nature to KIRIS (i.e., open-response questions), and although math portfolios were put “on hold” by the state during the year of this study, three-quarters of teachers continued to generate them at the school level as a best practice. Additionally, over 90% of writing teachers declared that the use of writing portfolios influenced their instructional planning with writing. Reportedly, three-quarters of fourth grade writing teachers reported integration with science and social studies teachers, while

over half of the seventh grade writing teachers reported increased frequency of their planning for interdisciplinary writing with science and/or social studies over the past three years. Overall, teachers “agreed that the KIRIS assessments and the curriculum materials provided by the state were the most potent influences on instruction in mathematics and writing, respectively” (p. 79). In essence, teachers became philosophically aligned with the performance-based approach to address content standards, versus traditional approaches. Conversely, the management of portfolios became problematic while attempting to cover the curriculum, despite their innovation and intent. Specifically, aspects of this study prompt my actions during data collection in search for signs of teacher-generated assessments similar in nature to those mandated by the district. Furthermore, I question the extent to which this idea factors into teachers’ philosophies of teaching and learning.

The decision of Vermont to launch its systematic reform with portfolio-based assessments in the early 1990s was twofold: (1) to produce quality data that reports student achievement, and (2) foster instructional improvement (Koretz et al., 1992). Using a “bottom up” approach, 4th and 7th grade mathematics and writing teachers compiled student performance evidence throughout the year and then submitted completed portfolios to the state. Although a substantial amount of time and money was invested in the scoring process, roughly 70% of the math teachers were positively influenced in their practice, with more time devoted to problem-solving, written communication, and diagramming, enhanced group work, and a greater appreciation for teaching.

As a result of the performance-based movement, valuable lessons were learned. Haertel (1999) acknowledged the 1990s movement, centered on performance assessments, as a solution to the subpar results of high-stakes testing. Contrary to the beliefs of alternative assessment

advocates, Haertel believed mere replacement will not resolve accountability concerns, and assessments will only be useful when teachers are skillful enough to make use of them in their classrooms. Moreover, generalizability of results becomes limited by criterion rubrics, subjective grading, and questionable reliability across assessments. In a similar vein, Stone and Lane (2003) concluded that when schools use scores as a benchmark to enhance accountability (i.e., rewards and sanctions), stakes become highest for district and school leaders. Specifically, this is the case when policy and assessment changes are introduced with intentions to improve the educational system. Unfortunately, the intended effects may not filter down to the teacher level where understanding of policy reform goals is most critical; this is especially true since teachers are responsible for implementing the changes in daily practice (Koretz et al., 1996; Stecher et al., 2000).

Changing assessment practice is only one part of a solution to improve teaching and learning (Herman, 1992), as demonstrated by the mixed results in teachers' practice reported in the CRESST Project aforementioned. Herman further asserted that "schools need support to implement new instructional strategies and to institute other changes to assure that all students are able to achieve the complex skills that these new assessments strive to represent" (p. 13). While conducting research in the early stages of a new state or local assessment program, particularly one with new structures in place, changes in pedagogy, professional development, and perceptions toward the assessment program should be closely examined (Stone & Lane, 2003). Notably, the suggestions offered by Herman (1992) and Stone and Lane (2003), helped frame my interview protocols with district leaders and middle school social studies teachers to examine these areas in particular.

Implications for Policy and Practice

As this study focuses on policy in the discipline of social studies, it is appropriate to consider the implications of adopting alternative assessments in teachers' practice. According to Grant and Salinas (2008), "rooted in the adage that testing can drive teaching, policymakers assume that new and presumably more ambitious tests will leverage more ambitious instruction and improved student performance (p. 224). This assumption raises three particular issues of concern affecting the teaching of social studies: (1) there is a continued debate over what knowledge and content is worth teaching and knowing; (2) teachers' perceptions and reactions to assessment reform vary considerably; and (3) there is a lack of evidence to suggest that testing provokes motivated teaching. More recently, an analysis shared by Cuban (2013) raises concerns, such as "why there have been so many structural changes in US schooling intended to transform teaching practices yet so little reform occurring in classrooms" (p. 119). In other words, the logic resides in changing teachers as the primary source to improve student learning. From a political angle, Cuban draws attention to policymakers' assumptions – that structural changes in policy will impact traditional teaching practices—made without considerations to investments in the quality of teaching. Conversely, a more profound approach would be to invest deeply in the microsystem, or teacher practice layer, and empower teachers to experience the changes that will aid in student learning.

Seminal within the body of literature on alternative assessment is Anderson's (1998) theoretical framework that draws attention to, and compares, the beliefs and assumptions of traditional versus alternative assessment. Emphasis is placed on the primary components featured in the center column of Figure 2.3, used as background for this research study.

Figure 2.3. Comparison of Philosophical Beliefs and Theoretical Assumptions of Traditional and Alternative Assessment

Traditional Assessment		Alternative Assessment
Universal assessment	Knowledge	Multiple Meanings
Passive process	Learning	Active Process
Separates process from product	Process	Emphasizes process and product
Discrete, isolated bits of information	Focus	Focuses on inquiry
To document learning	Purpose	To facilitate Learning
Cognitive abilities as separate from affective and conative abilities	Abilities	Connects between cognitive, affective and conative abilities
Views assessment as objective, value-free and neutral	Assessment	Views assessment as subjective and value-laden
Hierarchical model	Power and Control	Shared model
Learning as an individual process	Individual vs. Collaborative Process	Learning as a collaborative process

(Anderson, 1998, p. 9)

This framework is essential to the context of this study as it highlights possible motives driving alternative assessment policy reform. Particularly, it supports a constructivist perspective with pedagogy through formative assessment practice and outlines the comparisons of teachers' epistemic beliefs. Anderson's beliefs helped structure the observation protocol, and were especially useful as I positioned myself in the classroom in search of evidence to support a constructivist learning environment.

Enactment at the Local Level

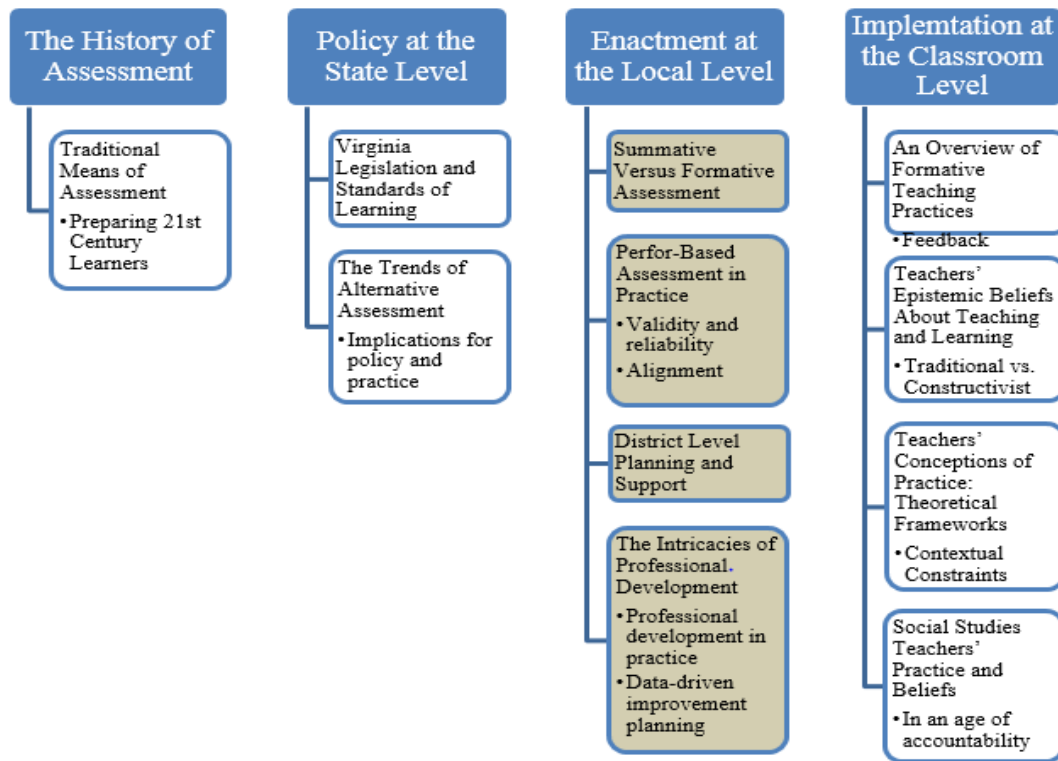
On a larger, districtwide scale, working toward common data-driven assessment practice requires consideration of several interventions, to include the collective work of key stakeholders – central office, administrators, and educators – working closely on tangents of reform (Wayman et al., 2012). In the Abbott (2015) study, the local district leaders, serving as key stakeholders within *the case*, chose to implement performance-based assessments (PBAs) as their alternative format. Moreover, the performance tasks were administered intermittently throughout the spring of 2015 to demonstrate students’ proficiency and coverage of content strands, and offer teachers ongoing data to diagnose student learning. Mainly, the pedagogical decisions made by primary central office personnel called for a shift in teachers’ practice. This work at the district level served as a precursor to a larger context in this study, which examines the impacts of reform on the types of assessments featured in teachers’ practice. A complete outline of the literature pertaining to this level is featured in Figure 2.2 on the following page.

Summative Versus Formative Assessment

While the landscape of assessment in teachers’ practice is vast, select types and formats should be matched with an intended purpose, such as how the assessment is intended to be used (Perie et al., 2009). Summative assessments, for example, remain the least flexible in terms of altering curricular focus, and have the longest cycles that typically span a school year. Black, Harrison, and Lee (2004) asserted that “assessment becomes formative assessment when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching to meet student needs” (p. 10). Seemingly, these assessments occur in shortened cycles to diagnose student learning in the moment to purposefully make instructional adjustments. In reality, summative assessments can become most purposeful when used formatively, in which students are provided opportunities for

revision and encouraged through peer and self-assessment to better understand how their work can be improved (Black et al., 2004).

Figure 2.2 Literature Review Map



Modern interpretations of formative assessment waver on the notion of formative measures serving as assessment ‘of’ or ‘for’ learning, summative or formative, respectively (Bennett, 2011). For example, interim assessments are typically administered at the local district level with medium-cycle assessments occurring at several points throughout a school year. A valuable interim assessment is intended to adapt teaching to students’ needs, and “can be an integral part of a comprehensive state or district assessment system, used in conjunction with classroom formative assessments and summative end-of-year assessments” (Perie et al., 2009, p. 13). When data are disaggregated by strand and teaching is aligned with students’ strengths and weaknesses, the focus is categorized as *instructional*. However, interim assessments with an

evaluative purpose are used to make adjustments to programming (e.g., pacing, curriculum, strategies) for the benefit of future students and to compare effectiveness of teaching between district schools. District coordinators and policymakers would benefit more from analyzing *evaluative* interim data as they develop instructional interventions. To best serve *instructional* purposes, only a limited number of important curricular goals should be assessed at a time to ensure instructional adjustments have been made in a timely manner (Perie et al., 2009). This research become essential as I examine the district leaders' roles to collect data from the schools as evidence of students' performance, and critical to administering the alternative assessments intermittently as formative assessments during the school year.

When an instructional task calls for student performance, Stecher (2010) has defined this as "a structured situation in which stimulus materials and a request for information or action are presented to an individual, who generates a response that can be rated for quality using explicit standards" (p. 3). In a similar vein, assessment tasks are considered authentic "when they are modelled after real-life problems and tasks and can supplement or replace conventional paper-and-pencil test" (Martin-Kniep, Sussman, & Meltzer, 1995, p. 47). Moreover, an authentic performance assessments allows for both process and product to be assessed (Basturk, 2005; Moon, Brighton, Callahan, & Robinson, 2005), bringing deeper insight to students' thinking and understanding. The formats of alternative assessment can take on different levels of objectivity and subjectivity and can fluctuate along a spectrum from entirely open-ended to more closed-ended formats. In fact, alternative formats used to supplant standardized tests vary with intent, such as to perform more complex tasks and allow students to engage in critical analysis with standards and skills (Kelly et al., 2007; Solley, 2007). The idea of "intent" informs my research

with district leaders, particularly as I aim to understand where the values of the district lie – with proficiency of content, complex skill sets, or both.

Performance-Based Assessments in Practice

The 2014 Virginia legislation grants school districts the autonomy to choose an alternative assessment format various options (i.e., portfolio, open-response) although, performance-assessment is preferred (VDOE, 2014). The format of performance assessment is most particular, in which the focus resides with *doing* versus *knowing* in order to equally monitor both process *and* product. According to Metin (2013), performance assessments should be relevant and applicable to daily life with provisions for various interpretations and open expression (Metin, 2013). In reality, the use of open-ended, performance tasks and assessment rubrics are not uncommon in classroom practice; however, their widespread use and frequency at all levels (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school) varies. The application of rubrics in K-12 practice is valued for the ability to assess students' critical thinking, and to evaluate knowledge and understanding on multiple levels (Marzano, 2002).

Performance assessment formats may be a more suitable, compared to traditional means (e.g., multiple choice), to assess 21st century learning goals – the complex forms of thinking our current generations will need to be successful in society (Basturk, 2005; Kelly et al., 2007). The complexity embedded in performance goals allows students to critically analyze relevant situations and demonstrate specific knowledge and skill sets (Solley, 2007; Stiggins, 1987). Student engagement in these practices calls for a shift from teacher to student-centered learning so that students can assume roles as active learners and make applications to real-world contexts (McDonald, 2008) through a designated task, project, or investigation (Stenmark, 1991). It is strongly suggested that performance assessments have a specified purpose to evaluate students

after exposure to strategic exercises, or ongoing practice, intended to solicit the desired performance (Stiggins, 1987). In light of these notions in the literature, I am led to question what implementation might look like in the classroom. As a result, in this research study I observe the sequencing of teaching and learning processes during multiple observations of participants' practice.

Intensions to enhance for student learning and assessment through alternative means have remained consistent over the past few decades. A multi-year project facilitated by Martin, Sussman, and Metzger (1995) served as a districtwide initiative in Long Island, New York to explore the role of alternative assessments at the classroom level. After participation in facilitated training and practice, teachers were successful with managing pedagogical decisions. Mainly, they acquired new methods for management and use of assessments as effective tools, enhanced through teacher feedback and students' self-assessment. Researchers found the ongoing, professional training to be pivotal in teachers' ability to successfully manage open-ended assessment formats in their practice. In a more contemporary study, Kuh and Nelson (2014) conducted a research project with teachers involved in Making Learning Visible (MLV), a project of Harvard Project Zero. The project's aim was to create a school culture for engagement in rich, student-centered learning activities. The study's findings demonstrated students' capability to successfully create and transmit knowledge through open-ended, alternative assessment formats. In both studies, teachers initially expressed frustrations with the limitations in capturing evidence of student learning through a standards-based assessment approach. In the end, teachers expressed favorable views toward the uses of alternative assessment to document students' cognition and skill performance. Notably, both studies incorporated the necessary

external support through professional development training sessions to create and score assessments, and even handle contentions with external testing accountability issues.

Assessment reform has potential to spur the development of new organizational routines at the classroom level. In Chicago public schools, Spillane et al. (2011) examined the concept of “coupling” state policy with classroom practice, particularly as it pertained to the leadership of administrators and curriculum coordinators. In one school, their collaboration allowed for the development of intermittent assessments in grades 1 through 8 (i.e., mathematics, reading, and writing), to which the creation of performance benchmarks allowed teachers to better gauge student achievement and make data-informed decisions in their practice. In another instance, The Five Week Assessment program was born to create alignment between the expectations of the reform and classroom practice. Overall, the new regulations prompted interdisciplinary efforts between mathematics, language arts, and science chairs to better align curriculums. The results were used to monitor student progress and classroom instruction, specifically as they foreshadowed needs for ongoing professional development. The research by Spillane et al. provoked me to investigate the collaborative efforts established between administration, coordinators, and teachers, in response to the Virginia reform.

Task Development: Validity and Reliability

There are several considerations for individuals who manage the processes of task development and implementation of assessment at the local level. For example, when diagnosing students’ understandings through an open-ended response-type task, content validity should be considered to gauge “the degree in which a test appropriately represents the content domain” (Martone & Sireci, 2009, p. 1335). High content validity would indicate an assessment’s content is tightly aligned with the purpose and subject matter of the assessment.

This research found construction of valid and reliable performance based assessments require planning and collaboration among various stakeholder groups, which causes me to question how alternative assessments in the case (i.e., district) of this study measure up.

To best illustrate the process of task development, Moon et al. (2005) conducted a 5-year research study with 46 educational professionals (i.e., teachers, professors, curriculum coordinators, and department officials) to create alternative assessments in states using traditional, multiple-choice tests as their primary means of assessment. Critical to the study was their threefold measurement of the tasks, particularly the degree to which: (1) the task addressed the learning targets (objectives); (2) real-world relevance and skills application were present; and (3) potential bias, economically or culturally, was minimized. Specifically, results from the content analysis targeted refinements of the task and rubric for future use, such as incorporating more student-friendly language in the rubric. Tests for reliability were provided through an examination of the scoring rubric, to ensure the standards were assessed and aligned with the task. Critical to the findings was students' use of the criterion rubric as a learning tool during initial planning, cross-checking along the way, and as a final check for completion, which deepened their thinking with provisions for clear expectations. Generally, rubrics that accompany performance tasks contain criteria used to evaluate students' development of knowledge and ability over a period of time (Meier, Rich, & Cady, 2006; Thomas, 2012). Like these researchers, I am hoping to better understand the use of rubrics as effective, reliable tools in teachers' scoring processes.

Alignment. Once an assessment system is enacted, periodic evaluation is needed to determine if the district, teachers, and students are meeting the desired goals. Perie et al. (2009) recommend implementation of a monitoring system through a reporting mechanism that is

designed to report evidence of student learning (and what that might look like), how data were used, and data reviews of any pilot testing. Additionally, an alignment chart would document relationships between content and standards in the assessment to note: possible limitations (Perie, et al., 2009), as well as appropriate reading levels (i.e., vocabulary, sentence structure), clear organization, and the purpose of prompts (Martone & Sireci, 2009).

Martone and Serici (2009) explain the importance of alignment research, especially within a statewide assessment system to which accountability trickles down to the local district level. The authors define alignment research in this context as “one means to demonstrate or evaluate the connection between testing, content standards (i.e., curriculum), and instruction” in which results would be especially beneficial for policymakers and curriculum coordinators as they strive to ensure cohesive alignment (p. 1333). Engagement in alignment research not only measures alignment between the three key elements aforementioned, but also provides understanding of the necessary changes for students to fairly and fully demonstrate proficiency.

District Level Planning and Support

Considerations of accountability associated with large-scale assessments are necessary at the state, district, and school levels to provide support and consistent communication with expectations (Martone & Sireci, 2009). Exactly *what* counts as measureable, and *who* is held accountable for what, are two salient thoughts associated with any accountability system (Linn, 2003). Ensuring teachers are primed for the implementation of newly designed measures, and especially measuring students’ proficiency of content standards, depends on a number of collaborative factors between the district and classroom levels. Such accountability is exemplified in the complex level of the exosystem in the Educational Environments Theoretical Framework (see Figure 2.1). It is the contextual variables of Central Office, the local School

Board, and professional development provided by the district that carry great responsibilities with regard to the phenomenon of this study.

Teachers are professed to be the most influential with students' classroom performance; therefore, an investment in professional development should be specifically designed to enhance teacher quality (Kuijpers, Houtveen, & Wubbels, 2010). According to Smith and Szymanki (2013), if the goal of educators is to prepare students with cognitive skills required for engagement in daily life, then preparations to engage students in critical thinking and higher-order questions should be a part of professional/faculty development. As a critical element in practice, these authors assert:

The use of questioning to aid students in moving from simple lower level recall to high level evaluation and synthesis provides a structure to help students beyond basic knowledge that is typically assessed on a standardized test to a deep conceptual understanding that allows for meaningful transfer. (pp. 22-23).

Teachers have control to make curricular and instructional adjustments based on assessment results, assuming they are proficient with pedagogical knowledge and tools to interpret the data and modify instruction accordingly (Kelly et al., 2007; Perie et al., 2009). This idea encourages me to consider the types of resources and personnel available for teachers' support upon preparing to face the phenomenon.

A growing emphasis on alternative, formative assessments requires new systematic approaches with data analysis to make informed educational decisions. Shepard (2008) acknowledged how veteran and novice teachers alike may find it challenging to accept such new roles of assessment as they conflict with existing beliefs and experiences. It is professed that all teachers will need professional development training to implement assessments in new ways that

will promote student success in this capacity. I therefore recognized the challenge in discovering: what kind of professional development teachers received and whether or not the training coincides with their philosophies of practice. The literature provides further insight into the barriers teachers encounter in the process of creating and implementing alternative, performance assessments in practice.

The Intricacies of Professional Development

The actions taken, and considerations made, in preparing teachers and students for alternative assessments, versus standardized multiple-choice tests, are considerably diverse. Through professional development, effective, research-based design elements that are professed to influence teachers' practice, include: (1) taking time to acknowledge participants' awareness of their educational practices and philosophies; (2) modeling "how to" transfer new techniques and skill sets into teaching; followed by (3) providing practice to develop familiarity with new protocols and procedures (Kuijpers et al., 2010). Furthermore, key to its implementation is the support from an external source (from the school) to facilitate the professional development with teams and individual teachers.

Teachers may reluctantly adopt formative assessment methods in their classrooms if they were never taught *how* and *why* to engage in the fundamentals of the practice (Wininger & Norman, 2005). An example of teachers' reservations was cited in Metin's (2013) study with 25 elementary school teachers who addressed their difficulties with the preparation and implementation of performance-based tasks with accompanying rubrics. Teachers were limited in their capabilities of implementing the performance tasks in the context of crowded classrooms, specifically with differentiation and scaffolding of the task for weaker students. The first major obstacle was identifying the appropriate subject matter, particularly the amount of curriculum

coverage for a single task and how to work across subjects/disciplines. Additional problems surfaced with rubric development during the selection of assessment criteria (i.e., learning targets) and outlining the levels of student performance. Lastly, there was an expressed need for quality examples of rubric formats to use as guides. Assessing the tasks was found to be timely, and due to the subjectivity involved, participants felt they lacked the necessary practice with scoring and training in general to engage with the practices successfully. Teachers' concerns regarding the lack of training to develop best practices with assessment protocols are cited in multiple instances throughout the literature. Like Metin, I hoped to better understand teachers' capabilities to navigate the new territory of performance-based assessments, accompanying rubrics, and protocols for scoring.

A similar study conducted by Cizek, Fitzgerald, and Rachor (1995) with 143 elementary and secondary teachers revealed a lack of professional collaboration on matters of assessment, resulting in a need for supportive interventions. Teachers revealed the absence of the following: creation of common assessments, discussions about students' assessment results, and awareness of colleagues' assessment practices. The researchers cited insufficient assessment training for teachers and administrators as detrimental to the learning culture. The deficiency in using assessments for data collection (i.e., evidence) with student learning was limited for a myriad of reasons, however, recommendations for professional development were provided to address future implementation throughout the school. This research prompts me to become better informed of the professional collaboration and communication between the exosystem and macrosystem and recognize any potential needs for intervention.

Professional development in practice. The development of effective teachers requires available opportunities to prosper professionally, aiding in their classroom performance through

the employment of best practices. When teachers lack knowledge of how to create assessments that effectively assess students' understanding, and interpret the data these assessments yield, there is no way to ensure learning is even taking place. Black and Wiliam (1998) recommended that teachers be provided professional learning opportunities that prepare them to increase the quality of their classroom assessments in effort to provide students with continuous access to descriptive feedback.

The need for professional development is further outlined by Aschbacher and Alonzo (2006) through recognition of the "response phase," which comes after analyzing student performance on formative assessment tasks. This need becomes an essential element of my study as I investigate how data obtained from the alternative assessments are used pedagogically to enhance student learning. Intricacies of the formative phase "involve refinement of future teaching plans and supporting students' use of assessment information, by providing feedback and supporting students' response to that feedback to improve learning" (Aschbacher & Alonzo, 2006, p. 180). Notably, the researchers acknowledge teachers' understanding of this essential phase in theory, but teachers oftentimes lack the knowledge of how to use students' data as evidence to make instructional adjustments in their practice.

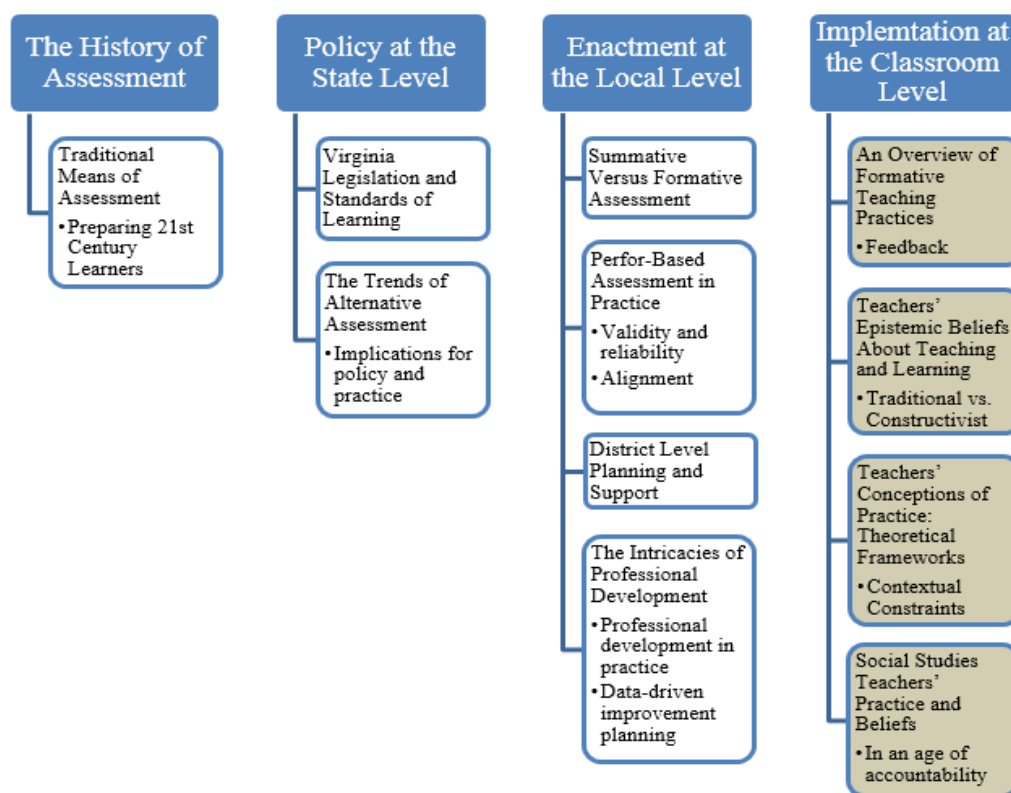
Data-driven improvement planning. Knowing how to use data purposefully to drive instruction is a salient component of data-driven improvement planning, a measure that involves making informed educational decisions (Abbott, 2015). Schools accustomed to data-driven instructional planning use data for various reasons, such as to identify lower performing students and populations, adjust educational policies, allocate for resources, and evaluate teachers and team performance (Kerr, Marsh, Ikemoto, 2006). Wayman and colleagues (2012) conducted a three-year systematic study to support three school districts' effective use of data for

instructional improvement. For example, researchers implemented data-related learning activities through a job-embedded approach to which tasks took place within the context of everyday routines, such as grading and lesson planning. Referred to as the “data-informed districts,” support with professional learning for data-gathering was linked to teachers’ practice in useful ways, and became a dynamic endeavor for districts’ data-driven success. I rely on this research in particular to analyze the districts’ sampling of alternative assessments across the schools to gauge teachers’ work.

Implementation at the Classroom Level

Analysis of assessment in isolation means very little, largely due to its interrelatedness with an abundance of variables in the context of education. The actions of assessing student progress draw attention to salient questions such as, “Why should teachers assess?” “When and how often should it occur?” and “What becomes of the data once it’s obtained?” In light of the 2014 Virginia legislation, “the intent of these guidelines is to encourage the use of assessments that may be used by teachers to improve their instruction” and “such assessments provide information about what students have learned as well as the concepts and skills that they have not yet mastered” (VDOE, 2014, pp. 1-2). To gain a better understanding of the connections between policy and reform and classroom practice it’s necessary to take a closer look at teachers’ ongoing assessment practices. An outline of the literature pertaining to such matters is featured in Figure 2.2 on the following page.

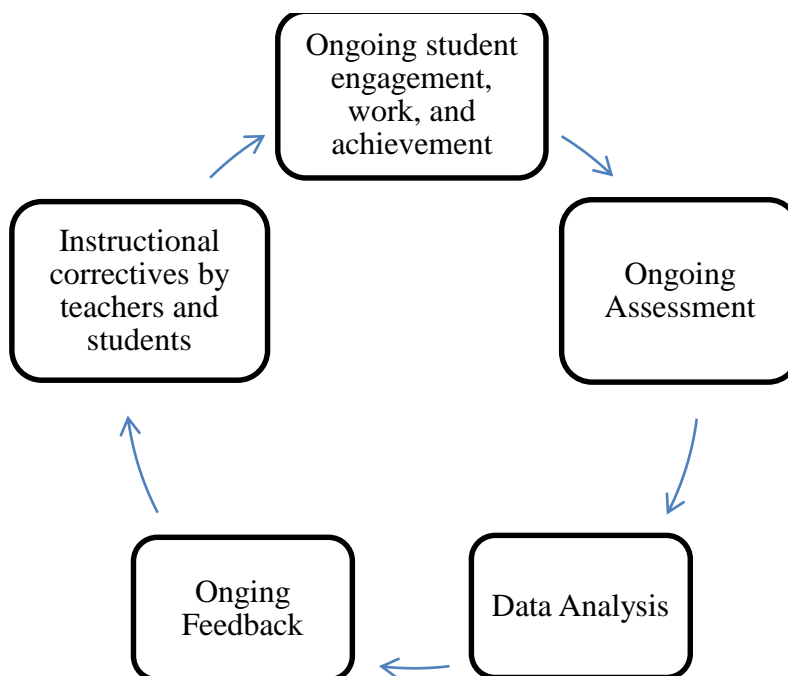
Figure 2.2 Literature Review Map



An Overview of Formative Teaching Practices

The practice of alternative formats has implications for the significant role assessment plays with teachers and students, demonstrating that when formative assessment is embedded in practice there can be substantial learning gains (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Similarly, the framework featuring the adapted ideas of Cauley and McMillan (2010) in Figure 2.4 is essential to the context of the classroom and aligns specifically with teachers' practice of formative assessment. I made minor adoptions to this formative assessment cycle to connect with the purposes of this study.

Figure 2.4. Formative Assessment Cycle



(Adapted from Cauley & McMillan, 2010)

To demonstrate powerful outcomes with student learning, Black and Wiliam (1998) analyzed results from 260+ studies on the effects of formative assessment to determine a typical effect size of .4 to .7. This is approximately double the average yearly growth elementary students in particular are expected to make on standardized tests (Bennett, 2011). Hattie and Timperley (2007) acknowledged the essence of formative assessment for students' awareness, particularly to "gain information about how and what they understand and misunderstand" (p. 101). This feedback allows students to develop self-awareness with areas of strength, and set goals to address areas in need of improvement. For teachers, the practice of formative assessment means devising learning tasks and questioning strategies that provide data on the effectiveness of their teaching. Such feedback can lead to strategic actions in the next steps of purposeful planning for teaching and learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In support, diagnostic data become formative only when used to adapt teaching and learning to meet students' needs, to which students can become actively involved in the process (Black & Wiliam,

1998). In essence, these methods allow for teachers and students to receive concrete feedback to determine how well they are progressing together towards learning targets (Anderson, 1998). Understanding formative assessment in this way prompts me to examine its use in teachers' practice to continually monitor students' work toward proficiency of content and skills.

Feedback. In order for feedback to be purposeful and valid, the assessment should measure the concepts and content the teacher has spent the majority of class time teaching and the tasks students have most recently worked toward (Linn, Baker & Dunbar, 1991). Additionally, Tomanek, Talanquer, and Novodvorsky (2008) acknowledged that “feedback provided by formative assessment is critical in a teaching-for-understanding practice” and “on-going recognition of the level and quality of students' understanding enables a teacher's decision-making about ‘next steps’ in instruction” (p. 1115). In the meta-analysis on feedback conducted by Hattie and Timperley (2007), 196 studies concluded an average effect size of 0.79, which fell in the top five of the 10 most influential factors on student achievement. When educators view assessment as purposeful based on the feedback it yields, the desired goal resides in “reducing the gap between actual performance and desired goal attainment” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 87). I connect this research to the instructional core of the Educational Environments Theoretical Framework—student learning. Therefore, I consciously look for signs of teacher feedback with students (i.e., verbal or writing) during data collection.

There is limited research to suggest teachers do in fact make revisions to their instruction and assessments using students' evidence of learning as the rationale and reasoning to justify their decision-makings (Tomanek et al., 2007). Additionally, there appears to be an underreporting of how teachers disaggregate formative data and use results to inform future instruction. Theoretically, the idea of teaching for understanding is a worthy goal but becomes

far more challenging in genuine practice (Tomanek et al., 2007). Contributing factors in teachers' assessment practices include years of teaching experience, grade level, and familiarity with assessment preparation (Cizek et al., 1995). Kerr and colleagues (2006) indicated how teachers oftentimes feel challenged by the lack of time needed for data analysis, not to mention the insufficiency amongst faculty with expertise in data analysis (particularly in urban areas). Such concerns, coupled with accountability pressures from superior sources, paint a realistic image of what many educators, organizations, and districts face as constrainers toward formative assessment use. Nonetheless, part of the development of professional practice includes recognizing the motives behind instructional actions and personal reflection of one's differentiated vision throughout the teaching and learning process.

Teachers' Epistemic Beliefs of Teaching and Learning

Teachers play an influential role in shaping what is taught and learned in the classroom through their pedagogical decisions (Cross, 2009). In other words, teachers are most influential in their decisions with the content *to* teach students and *how* to teach it, both of which play a critical role in students' learning experiences (Hennessey et al., 2013). These decisions shape the learning environment culture in which teachers' perceptions of their roles and their values of assessment and instructional methods are reflected. Teacher belief systems become salient to this study and are further outlined in Chapter IV which features teachers' biographies.

Traditional versus constructivist. Teachers' classroom practices traditionally follow suit with their individual values and beliefs of teaching and learning (Cizek et al., 1995). Through a traditionalist lens, students are oftentimes viewed as empty vessels into which teachers assume the responsibility of infusing knowledge (Freire, 1972). The sheer overuse of lecture and objective tests to deposit information encourages passive learning, memorization, and

objectivity (Anderson, 1998). Along similar lines, Reeve (2009) acknowledged that teachers have a choice to embrace either a “controlling” or “autonomy supportive” style of advocacy for student learning. A controlling approach to teaching is likely to stem from “outside forces (e.g., administrators, state standards, high-stakes testing, parents, and media reports)” that enforce “the twofold burden of responsibility and accountability for student behaviors and outcomes” (Reeve, 2009, p. 164). In contrast, autonomous support is demonstrated through teachers’ behaviors and nurturing of students’ intrinsic motivation through instructional tasks. Reeve (2009) posited such support can result in self-energizing, self-directed classroom productivity. Moreover, fear for loss of control drives some teachers’ development of teacher-centered classrooms and controlling behavior. Maggioni and Parkinson (2008) conducted a broad literature analysis that indicated commonalities across studies regarding the role teachers’ epistemic beliefs had in fostering students’ mastery of their learning. Teachers’ individual epistemologies in particular were analyzed for cognition, beliefs, and resources in the practice of their domain. Contrasting conceptions in the domain of history were found among forms of knowledge, sources of knowledge, and stances toward knowledge. In essence, the authors present teachers’ perceptions of learners through two primary, dichotomous views: the student as recipient of knowledge, or the student as constructor of knowledge.

A teacher with an empiricist view (i.e., recipient of knowledge) in contrast to a constructivist view (i.e., constructor of knowledge) is likely to exhibit specific characteristics and actions/behaviors, as featured in Table 2.1 on the following page.

Table 2.1 Characteristics of Empiricist and Constructivist Viewpoints

An Empiricist View	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a preference for “rigidly structured” teacher-centered approaches to teaching and learning • a lack of opportunities for students to develop their own inquiry • the domination of classroom discussions through noncontroversial, or safe, topic • a concern for students’ internalization of one correct answer • an authoritative view in the classroom with preferred discussion of noncontroversial topics • a pattern of teacher-prompted questions and students’ responses, followed by evaluation
A Constructivist View	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the authority of learning is shared among teacher and students • a positive and mutual support of verbal and behavioral exchanges are presented among the class • the formation of meaningful questions are valued over the sheer provision of answers to questions • an emphasis is on helping students develop effective ways to generate and validate knowledge • a value of personal relevance is evidenced within the topics under investigation • comfort with students’ investigation, to which process and products are sometimes uncertain

(Maggioni & Parkinson, 2008)

Ultimately, empiricist teachers who view knowledge as definitive tend to rehearse correct answers through thorough explanation, whereas constructivist teachers tend to take time to address student misconceptions and facilitate different ways of knowing. The study’s findings support the hypothesis “that, by affecting instruction, teachers’ individual epistemology and calibration may play a role in fostering those conditions that enable students to become ‘masters’ of their learning” (Maggioni & Parkinson, 2008, p. 451). However, it is necessary to note that teachers’ views were not all entirely one-sided, several teachers demonstrated evidence of both views, and teachers’ practices may be moderated by contextual constraints (i.e., curricular and institutional) that suggest an inability to attain personally established educational goals.

Recognizing the functions that aid in shaping a productive learning culture is essential. Traditionally grounded in the theoretical work of Piaget, Bruner, and Vygotsky, a constructivist approach to learning supports alternative means of assessment (Anderson, 1998; Linn et al., 1991). In the late 1990s and early 2000s a myriad of reform initiatives, encompassing new curriculum, standards, and teaching techniques, engendered new interpretations of constructivism (Fosnot, 2005). For example, Fosnot believed constructivism not to be categorized as a pedagogy, but instead a pure theory of learning associated with hands-on, discovery and co-construction of pathways between teacher and students. In support, Howe and Berv (2000) assert that learning must originate from students' knowledge, attitudes, and interests. Associated processes of constructivism include teaching students how to become consumers of knowledge and self-regulated learning through experience, reflection, and social interaction. Lessons in constructivist classrooms are purposefully designed to pose problems, incorporate big ideas, honor student inquiry, and invite students to actively engage through exploration of their ideas (Anderson, 1998). These theories helped frame the structure of my observation protocol in search for signs of a teaching and learning environment suited for the preparation of alternative assessments, as opposed to the old, Standards of Learning system. Reflected in the literature are a number of influences on a teacher's conceptions of instructional planning, delivery, and assessment.

Teachers' Conceptions of Practice: Theoretical Frameworks

Teacher's pedagogical beliefs and theories are shaped by many factors. In a historical review of theoretical frameworks in education, Fang (1996) examined the complexities and tensions that exist between teacher beliefs and practice. For starters, a literature review from the 1990s featured teachers' shift from a focus on student outcomes to a more personal and

internalized focus on teachers' cognition and beliefs regarding pedagogical planning and decision-making. The belief of teacher as "the manager" of content and students in the classroom has implications for the kinds of instructional tasks and delivery methods one might observe. According to James (2008), accurate interpretations regarding students' engagement or resistance with learning in the classroom require a closer look at teachers' belief systems.

In a qualitative study conducted by Thomas et al. (2011), 13 elementary teachers were interviewed and observed to gain an understanding of the link between teachers' conceptions of formative evaluation and their evaluation practices. The study's phenomenon featured systematic curriculum reform that began in 2001, with intentions to transform teaching practices through assessments *for* learning that focus on process versus final products and grades. A constructivist approach in this context served as a practical space for teacher and student to evaluate collectively on an ongoing basis, to include students' self-regulated learning. An examination of teachers' classroom practices, captured through an observation analysis framework, focused on the context of the activities (i.e., materials, learning objectives) and the interactions between teacher and student(s). Particularly, the role of feedback was viewed as a valuable aspect of formative evaluation and a "look for" during observations. Using a stimulated recall approach during interviews allowed the researchers and teachers to discuss the context of specific formative evaluation practices captured during recorded classroom observations. Findings revealed teachers' conceptions were categorized most often by dimensions of time (i.e., occurrence during the learning phase) and roles (i.e., interplay of teacher-student and student-student).

Although several teachers acknowledged formative evaluation processes to collect student data (i.e., notes and charts), teachers' value of students' knowledge as a product played a

key role in teachers' decision-making processes. According to Thomas et al. (2011), "teachers appeared to have a clear goal for the intended product and they used a variety of statements and questions (judgmental, guiding, and descriptive) to direct the students toward their goal" (p. 393). Evidence from the majority of teachers' feedback focused on the product of the learning (i.e., knowledge) versus process, which contradicted teachers' articulated interest in constructivist learning. Professional development was a suggested intervention, serving as a bridge between policy reform and teachers' practice with formative evaluation methods to further explore the creation of a constructivist learning environment. These findings make me consider the extent to which social studies teachers in my study engage in assessment *for* learning as a critical component of constructivist learning with emphasis on process versus product.

In a qualitative study by Cross (2009), teachers' perceptions of their subject played a central role in their belief system of classroom practice and student learning. Germane to the study was Cross's position with beliefs being "difficult to define," yet could be broken down into areas of knowledge, dispositions, and values. His purpose was to uncover not only the types of beliefs teachers held, but exactly how they were translated into practice through: (1) organization of instructional tasks, (2) interaction with students, (3) assessment of student learning, and (4) contentions with reform-based methods. After 10 weeks of data collection from observations, interviews, and lesson plan analysis, teachers' views were evident primarily through the classroom activities and interactions with students. Findings revealed that teachers' beliefs were a "fairly reliable" predictor of classroom instruction. The notion of teachers' beliefs systems carries great weight in my study as I search for evidence of teachers' proclaimed beliefs during observations of their instructional practice.

In the literature, epistemic beliefs are generalized as the ways in which individuals come to acquire knowledge and recognize the nature of knowing (Hennessey et al., 2013). It was believed that teachers' classroom practices serve as evidence of how students should provide evidence of knowing and how to justify *what* it is known through justification beliefs – integration, reasoning, evaluation, structuring arguments, looking to authority, and display of opposition. Hennessey and colleagues addressed the call for further investigation of teachers' beliefs about their practice, and how these systems reinforce methods to justify the founding of new knowledge. This quantitative study required close analysis of how elementary students were learning and using methods to justify what it meant “to know.” Participation consisted of 54 pre-service and 16 in-service elementary school teachers part of a professional development program through a large land-grant university. During each content methods course, in-service teachers served as mentors for per-service teachers. Pre-service teachers underwent university training in inquiry-based, cross-disciplinary teaching strategies. All participants completed a 30-item Likert scale questionnaire that incorporated questions regarding three, common epistemic belief systems set in the context of instructional settings:

- *Foundationalists* - believe in a hierarchical approach of basic, or foundational, beliefs that cannot be disputed as they are common and intuitive. Whereas non-basic beliefs serve as extensions that can be justified, they are traced back to basic beliefs that are self-evident;
- *Coherentists* - beliefs are linked with one another within a system, structured in a web-like format (e.g., concept map). The more connections, the more justification is created; and
- *Reliabilists* - believe that one could have acquired knowledge unintentionally, therefore, data collection would be necessary to confirm the belief through a cognitive process external to the learner (e.g., research, experiment) (Hennessey et al., 2008)

Findings reported the pre-service teachers demonstrating the highest scores in reliabilist beliefs, with a second of coherentist, or a mix. In-service teachers' responses reflected mostly reliabilist and coherentist views as a whole. With regard to teachers' beliefs about justification practices, the researchers concluded that "teachers need to develop an array of pedagogical practices that enable them to teach students how to use differing pieces of evidence to learn new information" (p. 504). This study in particular prompts my consideration of how students acquire social studies knowledge in preparation for alternative assessments. Furthermore, I wonder how teachers engage students in the complex processes of justification and reasoning that stretch students' thinking beyond old assessment methods of choosing a letter (i.e., multiple choice).

In a similar vein, a mixed methods study by Teague, Anfara, Wilson, Gaines, and Beavers (2012) explored the beliefs and practices of middle school teachers in all core academic areas. The researchers highlighted the middle school ages spanning 10-14 as relevant to the development of self (i.e., identity) in the surrounding world. The researchers felt this signified a need for significant learning tasks, and therefore, generated a theoretical framework featuring research of developmentally responsive instruction: traditional versus differentiated instruction, direct versus indirect instructional approaches, and six research-based instructional practices (e.g., attention to learning styles, hands-on learning, and making connections between prior and new knowledge). The mixed-methods research design by Teague and colleagues included a total of full-staff participants from five middle schools in Tennessee, consisting of a total of 167 Likert-type survey responses, 28 semi-structured interviews, and 81 unannounced classroom observations. The researchers analyzed teachers' espoused beliefs in comparison to what was observed in practice. Key among the findings was a close comparison between reported teacher-direct instruction (55%) and the confirmed observations in practice (45%), and over 75% of the

observations included teacher-centered or independent students' instructional actions and tasks. Overall, "the widespread use of direct instruction as a common classroom practice was supported by the teacher interviews" to which justifications for strategy selections appeared arbitrary versus purposeful (p. 218). Implications for practice included systematic measures to remedy the disconnection between teachers' purported beliefs and their observed practice. Teachers' reporting of barriers that prohibited them from implementing best practices for middle grades included: students' lack of curiosity, proper behavior, and the toll of time and work bestowed upon the teachers. Moreover, participants cited the pressures of accountability with high-stakes testing and the daily posting /reciting of standards and objectives in the classroom, and postponing enriching "extra" activities until after end-of-year testing due to excessive amounts of content coverage. Analyzing the work of Teague et al. triggered my decision to follow-up teacher interviews with classroom observations to corroborate their proclaimed beliefs within practice. Additionally, my attention was drawn to the idea of possible tensions this reform may have brought to educational practice in general.

Contextual constraints. Inconsistencies between teachers' epistemic beliefs and their inabilities to attend to their beliefs may be a result of complexities inside and/or outside of the classroom. Fang (1996) suggested that "contextual factors can have powerful influences on teachers' beliefs and, in effect, affect their classroom practice" (p. 53). Contextual factors shed light on classroom realities that can be academic, social, environmental, and even circumstantial. For example, the school climate may provide constraints for enacting one's beliefs when decision-making is influenced by external factors such as administrator's decisions, or even state and local district mandates (Davis, Konopak, & Readence, 1993).

Making dichotomous decisions in the classroom regarding the efficiency and exploration of learning (i.e., standardization or enrichment) and methods of teaching content standards (i.e., traditional or alternative) is not a new phenomenon (Fang, 1996). Along similar lines, James (2008) acknowledged how “teachers’ focus on efficiency is reinforced within the larger public school context where students and teachers are held increasingly accountable for performance on end-of-year tests...these tests almost always emphasize breadth over depth” (p. 175). When contentions arise teachers feel compelled to focus on content coverage even if their beliefs lie elsewhere. Teachers may strive for layers of depth and complexity but feel constraints with accountability to prepare for towards the next standardized test. Such circumstances may oftentimes result in one-size-fits-all, teacher-centered instruction.

Research on Social Studies Practice

According to Grant and Salinas (2008) teachers’ responses to reform with state-level testing do not often reflect great changes with instructional methods, but more so in the content and developed assessments. Social studies teachers’ have historically used multiple-choice, short-answer, and essay questions on their classroom exams to assess knowledge. When a state undergoes reform with testing formats and items, teachers are more likely to reflect this change in their classroom assessment practices. Such was the case with New York upon adding document-based questions (DBQs) to their state assessments.

In the field of social studies, Van Hover (2008) declared the need to educate teachers with “evidence-based decision-making” in an attempt to define what making a difference in student learning actually looks like in practice. With regard to social studies teachers’ professional development, Van Hover has made the call for follow-up, post-workshop/training research to determine its impact on teaching and student learning over time. Common among

professional development offerings is the study of a single program, “implemented by more than one facilitator at more than one site” to which the “relationship among facilitators, the program and participants’ learning is studied” (Van Hover, 2008, p. 366). Implementation of “the single program” is significant to my research as the district implemented this method of professional development to prepare 6th and 7th grade teachers for the alternative assessment reform.

Social Studies Teachers’ Practice and Beliefs

One problematic area in the discipline of history is learning how to teach it to students. Social studies teachers, both pre-service and in-service, adopt belief systems and theories regarding students’ learning (i.e., modalities and capacities), the subject(s) they teach (i.e., value of topics), and their instructional responsibilities in the classroom (Cross, 2009; Fang, 1996). Slekar (1998) studied the ebb and flow between the two epistemologies that most likely result from experiences, such as ‘apprenticeship of observation’ or experiences of what has been experienced in the past. Furthermore, it is believed that “what students learn from their ‘apprenticeship of observation’ may be deeply embodied in their belief systems” (p. 488). Specifically, Slekar posits teaching beliefs are influenced by the developed stages of learning the subject or how to teach the discipline to others. Veritably, a teacher’s past experiences can cause one to accept new methods out of avoidance or dissatisfaction with traditional ones, or reject new methods of teaching out of familiarity and comfort with traditional ones. These actions are of particular interest as I ask social studies teachers to express their perceptions of the old assessment system compared to the newly adopted assessments and approaches toward student proficiency.

There are a number of factors that act upon one’s epistemological beliefs. For example, one can speculate that a student who “received” information in classes or courses from a teacher

with an *objective* epistemology, versus an *interpretive* epistemology, had learned through rote memorization and fact-based, didactic means of learning. Teachers and instructors with an interpretive epistemology are more likely to engage students in the interpretation of historical knowledge through means of inquiry and a collection of perspectives (Slekar, 1998).

Additionally, ‘reflexive conservatism’ is a factor of interest as it becomes “a reflex action to rely on more familiar approaches to teaching when confronted with new and unfamiliar teaching methods” (p. 488). Slekar’s findings revealed that exposure to multiple pedagogical resources may instill an open-mindedness to alternative pedagogical approaches to learning. The exposure to alternatives may assuage teacher’s temptations to default to convenient and comfortable practices that may not be in the best interest of the students. External resources that may have an influence on epistemological views associated with the teaching and learning of history might be the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) website, particularly the C3 Framework that reinforces inquiry-based approaches to teaching (NCSS, 2013). Notably, Slekar’s theories have implications for in-service teachers in this study, specifically within their practice, knowing that experiences in the K-12 continuum (i.e., chronosystem) can impact and shape teaching and learning belief systems.

Secondary Social Studies Practice

Although curricular reform is generally an under-researched area in social studies practice (Levstik, 2008), a mix of quantitative and qualitative studies have been conducted at the secondary level to provide a clearer image of current social studies practice. On a national scale, Russell’s (2014) survey research with over 280 middle/high school social studies teachers (grades 6-12) suggested little change with instructional practices from the 20th to the 21st century, to which current practices reflect a teacher-centered approach to student learning.

Results reflected teachers' dominant use of lecture, textbook use and writing tasks outside of the classroom, while 44% reported student participation in critical thinking more than half of the time, with 36% engaged in problem-solving and 32% examining primary sources. To remedy this concern, Russell called attention to the work of the NCSS (2008) and Partnerships for 21st Century Skills, which included a guiding resource on social studies instruction, "The 21st Century Skills and Social Studies Map." Outlined in the map are non-traditional activities and instructional strategies to support "today's students" through creativity, media and technology literacy, critical thinking, problem-solving, cross-cultural skills, and student responsibility, to name a few. Examples of supportive methods for 21st century learners include primary source documents, role-playing, simulations, technological software/games, and service learning. Similarly, national survey results from Lucey, Shifflet, and Weilbacher's (2014) study suggested social studies practices, sampled from elementary and middle school settings, were consistent with teaching and learning of basic facts as opposed to engagement in more non-traditional methods. More than half of middle school teachers (57%) reported daily whole class instruction, with only 42% engaging in occasional use (2-3 times per month) with computer-based applications and primary sources.

In contrast, Virgin's (2015) three-year, qualitative study was designed to shift a middle-school social studies department from teacher-centered instruction toward a customized learning environment. The initiative to enrich teaching and learning was attained through engagement in "big ideas," student inquiry, students' interests, and making relevant connections. Specifically, the department's goals reflected students' ability to engage in the following: ask and investigate relevant questions, focus on core concepts, make purposeful connections between content and application beyond school. A specific target was to incorporate conceptual concepts (e.g.

change) in teachers' practice to personalize learning and allow students to make connections between historical and real-world topics. Notably, student inquiry was used to spark dialogue and deliberations in a social manner, allowing time for students to discover, versus being told, what was important to know and why.

Middle school curriculum, instruction, and assessment. While teachers oftentimes align their practice with testing mandates through a fact-oriented approach, the role of teachers' personal beliefs about assessment and instruction and how it influences their practice, are as equally if not more important (Neumann, 2013). A point of contention in particular can arise when state mandated accountability exams in reading and mathematics take precedence over the discipline in social studies. Even in middle school, when stakes are lower and advancement toward the next grade level is not in jeopardy, pressure remains on teachers to obtain high marks on annual progress benchmarks for state rating purposes. The ways in which teachers respond to such accountability through a "bare bones" approach with historical content remain in question. In this light, Neumann draws attention to the need for current research to establish a greater understanding of the impact state mandated testing has on shaping teachers' perceptions with curriculum, instruction, and assessment. This is especially the case because studies on the relationship between pedagogy and standardized testing have been largely absent within the past couple of decades.

With respect to the middle years, a relationship worthy of consideration is how teacher preparation focused on adolescent development impacts teachers' instructional planning for authentic, intellectual tasks (Conklin, 2014). In other words, there is a need to better understand the variances in the "specialized middle grades" preparation – with attention paid toward meeting the specific social, emotional, and academic needs of young adolescents – compared to a

“secondary social studies” preparation, with value placed upon the teaching of content knowledge and high school students. Of great significance is the reality of teachers from both pathways serving as educators in today’s middle schools. As such, what social studies instruction and assessment should look like in the middle grades begs for greater attention.

With a focus on the middle grades in particular, Conklin (2011) addressed the debate on the appropriateness in teaching intellectually challenging social studies, such as through controversial issues and primary sources. While some teachers raise concern over intellectual readiness during the middle years of development, Conklin argues there is a responsibility for social studies teachers to invest in students’ interests and concerns regarding societal issues while elevating their thinking in challenging ways. Teachers cannot afford to underestimate students’ abilities to engage with skills sets such as analyzing, interpreting, and reasoning, those that are essential to help young adolescents “think for themselves and make decisions in a complex society” (p. 224).

Integrated Instruction: Literacy Development in Social Studies

Although writing is a critical engagement in daily life, “many students in the United States do not develop strong writing skills” (Graham, Capizzi, Harris, Heber, & Morphy, 2014, p. 1016). In consideration of interdisciplinary writing in middle school, Graham et al. conducted a national survey of 285 randomly selected language arts, social studies and science teachers in grades six through eight. Significant to their findings were social studies and science teachers’ feelings of insufficient preparation for middle school writing instruction. Assessment data was minimally used to inform teachers’ writing instruction, with insufficient technology engagement to support students’ writing skills. Common among teachers’ writing practices was the direct instruction approach, consisting of basic writing skill tasks (i.e., short answer, note-taking,

worksheets, writing paragraphs, summarizing, and journaling). Although the overwhelming majority of middle school teachers felt writing should be taught in all subjects, and assumed the responsibility to teach students how to write, social studies teachers in particular engaged students with writing an average of five minutes per day.

Swanson and Wanzek (2013) highlighted the alignment between academic literacy and college and career readiness, and discussed research-based literary practices appropriate for social studies instruction in middle/high school classrooms. Key among their researched-based methods were: use of primary source texts/readings, practice with essential vocabulary found in historical contexts, and the adoption of critical themes in teaching and learning. The use of inquiry, as a critical reading strategy and comprehension checks, was claimed to foster individual student accountability with learning. Lastly, they found a “team-based learning” approach with culminating tasks (e.g., a 1920s magazine cover that expresses cultural, economic, and political change) to be both motivational and value-based with students upon building literacy skills.

Disciplinary literacy in social studies. Disciplinary literacy in social studies covers a range of complimentary, historical reading and writing instructional initiatives (Monte-Sano, Del La Paz, & Felton, 2014), and requires shifting students’ thinking about history from a factual-based discipline to one that is interpretive. For starters, historical writing includes teaching students how to form arguments by linking claims with evidence and framing one’s reasoning with examples from historical texts. Furthermore, a solid foundation of historical reading comprehension strategies (i.e., summarizing, establishing main points) taught through a range of texts, will build students contextualized understanding of varying perspectives.

Fostering adolescent literacy is critical to the development of lifelong, proficient readers (Binkley, Keiser, & Strahan, 2011). Employing measures of disciplinary literacy has been

viewed as a complimentary means to attain this goal while expanding content knowledge, to which teachers share responsibility of instructing students with reading, writing, thinking, and communicating. Recognizing the common challenge social studies teachers face to build student motivation with factual reading and literacy skill sets, Binkley et al. (2011) conducted a cross-case analysis study with middle school social studies teachers, grades six through eight, on a disciplinary literacy project. Partnership between teachers, school and district leaders and university staff provided for ongoing professional development (one full year) to support the integration of literacy into teachers' practice. Significant to their "Connected Coaching" project was the inclusion of literacy coaches from the neighboring university that would serve as mentors to teachers, as well as support provided through a summer institute. Specifically, job-embedded professional development was provided during the school year, which included co-teaching, unit planning, and strategy/resource identification, to promote "innovative" and "reflective" practice. A significant take-away from participants was their increased engagement in collaborative practice and expressed "importance of literacy skills that would translate into more meaningful social studies content" (p. 155).

In a similar vein, Monte-Sano et al. (2014) explored the disciplinary literacy agenda by infusing reading and writing with historical content and skill sets. Based on the results of their mixed-methods study with 8th grade US History teachers, they found that "teachers' knowledge of the discipline and attention to students' ideas allowed them to skillfully adapt the curriculum to better meet students' needs and push students' thinking" (p. 540). In this light, they called attention to the use of the C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013) as a means of working with historical evidence and sharing conclusions. Particular attention was drawn to the work of Wineburg (1991), which engages students as historians as they learn through authentic tasks. Wineburg's

research with historians and high school seniors suggested that students need guided assistance with specific skills to create historical interpretations, versus memorization of facts and finding answers in a textbook (p. 84). Wineburg's work requires analyzing historical text as an artifact that provides insight into time, place, and circumstances. Three main skills sets are practiced through historical, reading, writing, and thinking skills: sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration. Additionally, inquiry serves as an effective historical reading strategy (e.g., tool) to establish rigor and relevance in students' work.

To assist students with contextual thinking, Reisman and Wineburg (2008) suggest teacher-guided activities, such as: (1) exploring the sequencing of key developments regarding a historical event, (2) use guided questioning to move students in a direction of self-discovery with historical knowledge, and (3) engage in teacher modeling of what an expert historian might think, do, and feel while engaging in a task. This development takes time and requires practice opportunities to apply their skills across various texts (i.e., primary and secondary sources). More recent work by Wineburg and Reisman (2015) clarified what disciplinary literacy is and is not in the arena of social studies. Engagement does not include generic reading strategies (i.e., summarizing, main idea, predicting) and instead consists of specific authentic skills that challenge readers of historical text. For example, "sourcing enjoins readers to engage authors, querying them about their credentials, their interest in the story they are telling, their position vis-à-vis the event they narrate" (p. 1). In short, the act of sourcing is "an entire way of apprehending the world" (p. 1). To accompany this strategy, contextualization engages students in the consideration of historical context (i.e., time, place, and circumstance) providing for greater insight to a particular time period/event.

In An Age of Accountability

Social studies practice is comprised of the interrelatedness between assessment, curriculum, and instruction. Further development of teachers' capacity for instructional decision-making requires taking a closer look at practices that assume the responsibility of preparing the 21st century learner. Pelligrino and Kilday (2013) call particular attention to the extent of which an inquiry-based approach fits with one's pedagogical style. In light of reform-based social studies education, one such approach is to remain supportive of the NCSS Framework to which the central theme of inquiry is noted to play a central role in the understanding of teaching history. Determining how social studies teachers infuse inquiry into their learning environment therefore became an initiative during my data collection (i.e., interviews, observations).

Reliable, research-based resources are available for social studies teachers to further promote 21st century, student-centered practices in their disciplines. One particular planning framework that features superior teaching and learning principles is the "NCSS framework of 5 Qualities of Powerful and Authentic Social Studies" (NCSS, 2008).

Table 2.2 NCSS Framework of Qualities of Powerful and Authentic Social Studies

Qualities	Definitions
Meaningful	Studies build curriculum networks of knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes that are structured around enduring understandings, essential questions, important ideas, and goals
Integrative	Curriculum addresses the totality of human experience over time and space, connecting with the past, linked to the present, and looking ahead to the future. Focusing on the core social studies disciplines, it includes materials drawn from the arts, sciences, and humanities, from current events, from local examples and from students' lives.
Value-Based	Students engage in experiences that develop fair-mindedness, and encourage recognition and serious consideration of opposing points of view, respect for well-supported positions, sensitivity to cultural similarities and differences, and a commitment to individual and social responsibility.

Challenging	Inclusion of the teaching of sophisticated concepts and ideas, and in-depth investigation of fewer rather than more topics with deep processing and detailed study of each topic.
Active	Students process and think about what they are learning through rich and varied sources, to reach understandings, make decisions, discuss issues and solve problems—not just “hands-on,” but also “minds-on.”

(Adapted from NCSS, 2008 <http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/powerful>)

The five qualities displayed in Table 2.2 are intended to serve as a guide to bring rigor, relevancy, varied perspectives, depth, and complexity to students’ learning experiences. These qualities added weight to my protocol for document analysis as I look across alternative assessments for signs of rigor, relevancy, and authenticity.

Similarly, Libresco, Alleman, Field and Passe (2014) feature a collection of seven classroom case studies with exemplary K-6 social studies teachers who incorporate social studies standards meaningfully in practice while maintaining a strong commitment to teaching within high-pressure environments. Significant to the findings across all cases was teachers’ realization of standards versus standardization, passions for social equity and justice, the preparation of students to improve human conditions in society, and long-lasting, relevant, and interactive learning experiences. Libresco and colleagues (2014) synthesized their findings to establish 15 common, best teaching practices within social studies teaching and learning. Central to their findings was teachers’ expressed importance of the professional development support received within their districts to assist with these practices. Among the practices are the following highlights:

- Establish a learning community;
- Design goals-oriented instruction;
- Balance constructivist and transmission teaching;
- Employ a range of assessment tools;

- Approach standards holistically;
- Emphasize skills instruction;
- Promote critical thinking; and
- Integrate social studies with other subjects (Libresco et al., 2014, p. 142).

The suggested beliefs of scholarship aforementioned point toward best teaching practices in social studies education. These practices, in light of a new movement toward performance-based assessment reform, assisted in laying the groundwork for the research study at-hand. I strategically used these elements as “look fors” within my observation protocol and during observing my participants’ classroom practice. Secondly, these points were cross-referenced with the professional development participants experienced prior to the start of the 2015-2016 school year.

Numerous theories and studies featured here pertain directly to the beliefs and influences of teachers’ practice. Not only did these serve as a starting point prior to data collection, but more broadly, assisted my efforts to later address the research question: How does reform focused on alternative assessment influence: (a) teachers’ perceptions, and (b) educational practice? To fill the current gap in the response of state policy reform as it impacts the classroom level, I intentionally uncovered the support measures passed from the state to the district level, and from the district to the classroom level. Participants’ philosophies of, and actions toward, alternative assessment reform were analyzed and revealed through a series of triangulated data collection methods that I share in Chapter III.

Literature Critique

In this critique of the literature I considered the theories and research methods that informed the phenomenological and case study methodology I will present in Chapter III

(Methodology). Specifically, I used this space to explain how my research moves the field forward to compliment previously conducted studies in the area of assessment practice, addresses gaps and limitations, and answers the call for future research on several fronts. I draw particular attention to the overarching topics of assessment reform in the 21st century, as it relates to my Educational Environments Theoretical Model, and discuss the interdisciplinary nature of social studies practice as a means to enhance literacy.

Alternative Assessment Reform

In light of the recent adoption of the ESSA (2015) and abolishment of federal accountability measures with NCLB, there is the need for research on states' initiatives to strengthen state and local control with assessment and accountability systems. My research in particular addresses the gap in alternative methods of state assessment reform, carried down from the state to the district and classroom levels. Discussions and theories on what the 21st century learner needs to be college and career ready in education are reported; however, there is a gap in qualitative research that follows teachers through their actions and beliefs in practice. As new initiatives to address 21st century learning have come to fruition, such as with the CCSS, a state like Virginia must find its own methods to monitor and gauge assessment and accountability. My study is purposeful in this capacity to bring clarity toward the movement of assessment reform working across multiple levels, or educational environments, to support student learning.

Macrosystem (state level) policy. Multiple large-scale studies on state assessment reform in the 1980s to the early 2000s revealed changes in teachers practice upon the adoption of alternative assessment measures. Although there were several longitudinal studies conducted on the impacts of assessment reform, the researchers did not extensively look at how this works across the layers of my theoretical model (i.e., state/regional, division, classroom, and student).

Largely absent across studies was the representation of state leaders and legislators, or those that had a stake in initiating and introducing the reform at the state level.

Empirical studies on the topic of alternative assessment reform have been generally ignored in the past 15 years. As a result, formative assessment methods used in a constructivist manner require greater attention to support the founding research conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s. I tackle this dilemma through my research that aligns with the work of Anderson's (1998) alternative learning environments, Black and Wiliam's (1998) formative assessment methods, and Marzano's (2002) use of rubrics, to name a few. Reporting social studies teachers' engagement with the formative assessment cycle (Cauley & McMillan, 2010) and teacher/student feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) makes this research unique as I have aimed to narrow the gap between assessment policy and middle school social studies practice.

Exosystem (district level) support. A significant gap of analysis was found in the "exosystem" layer, leaving vague interpretations of how district leaders carry out state assessment reform, offer support for teachers, and use appropriated funding and resources. The recent adoption of the 2014 Virginia legislation has opened several doors of research opportunity, which up to this point have been largely unexplored. My work particularly expands the theory of Shepard (2008), who acknowledged the challenges of veteran and novice teachers alike, who share their experiences adopting new roles to facilitate alternative assessment in practice, which are juxtaposed with existing epistemic belief systems and previous assessment experiences (i.e., SOL testing).

I confront the limitations of research conducted on assessment reform directives at the district level, mainly as I have captured the voices and experiences from district leaders whose goal is to enhance teaching and learning within a district as the state's mandates are carried out.

Furthermore, I have addressed the call (Van Hover, 2008) for follow-up to professional development conducted between the district and classroom levels to gauge teacher and student growth. Assistive measures for support have been reported; however there is a lack of follow up on the district's part for measurement purposes. Specifically, my work responds to previously stated deficiencies of teachers' reported use of assessment for data collection (i.e., evidence) and analysis of student progress, in addition to teachers' engagement in data-driven improvement planning to respond to students' needs. Furthermore, a critical look into classroom practices (i.e., instructional strategies and assessment methods) at the microsystem level was minimal, which is the layer in which student learning is impacted the most.

Social Studies Practice

A mix of comprehensive methods have been used to conduct K-12 research on social studies practice in the United States. Studies range in duration from a single semester to 3 years. The numbers of study participants range from 3 to approximately 300, while teachers' experience ranged from novice teachers to veteran teachers of 30 or more years. Large-scale, quantitative studies were most prevalent, with use of surveys to determine instructional practice and trends (i.e., methods, strategies, and assessment). A limitation of these studies was the "self-report" measure, which required classroom observations or interviews for confirmation and detailed findings that would include rationale for teachers' actions. Several small-scale, qualitative studies were conducted with populations at the district or school level (Binkley et al., 2011; Virgin, 2015). Although these studies provided greater insight to the lived experiences of teachers in their daily practice, a limitation would be the extensiveness of the research to reflect change over time (i.e., more than three years).

Interdisciplinary practice. A common theme throughout the social studies literature was the integration of literacy skills with (teaching) historical content instruction, supported by CCSS at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. The ways in which Virginia attends to these matters is underreported, which is where my research will bring clarity to how state legislation can enhance teachers' practice and student achievement. Disciplinary literacy (i.e., reading, writing, and communication) has been a trending topic in research for the past decade. Researchers argue that no longer is literacy development the sole responsibility of English teachers; instead it serves as the catalyst to conceptually understand the content of any discipline. Additionally, several researchers address teachers' limited use of technology to enhance social studies instruction, which is explored in my research through interviews, observations, and document analysis at the middle school level.

Chapter Summary

The ideas presented in Chapter II fit within the context of the theoretical framework and align with the contextual variables featured among the educational levels that frame the analysis of this study. The complex relationships between the educational environments (i.e., state, district, and classroom) are acknowledged and broken down into the key issues of the Ecological Systems Theoretical Model. More specifically, when political directives from the state filter into the hands of stakeholders at the local level (i.e., central office), the intended outcomes and realities in the classroom may not be met with truest intentions (Labaree, 2010). Support through professional development at the district-level could serve as the bridge between policy reform and educational practice if formative assessment training offers pedagogical knowledge of how to manage the tasks, interpret data, and use data to adjust instruction and offer student feedback. Teachers' epistemic frameworks guide their practice and contain beliefs that are

central to the way they theorize their role in the classroom. Some frameworks seek to justify teachers' roles within the subject area and how content is learned, while others conceptualize beliefs of practice in general, such as with the delivery of content standards and the attainment of learning goals. As with most content areas, social studies has its own unique set of values that reflect 21st century skills sets, many of which foster academic, social, and emotional growth.

In Chapter III, I describe a case study approach to investigate the implementation of locally-developed alternative assessments. From separate traditions, I used phenomenological and case study analyses to address the following three objectives. First, the design was used to uncover the experiences and actions of district leaders in one large school district with respect to the accountability measures of the 2014 Virginia legislative reform. Second, the design was used to collectively analyze the lived experiences of 6th and 7th grade middle school social studies teachers in Landstone City Public Schools, specifically in response (i.e., perceptions and practice) to the 2014 Virginia legislative reform. And finally, the design was used to explore the district's efforts to bridge policy reform and educational practice through supportive measures of (i.e., professional development, internal/external resources) that address best practices with alternative assessment.

CHAPTER III

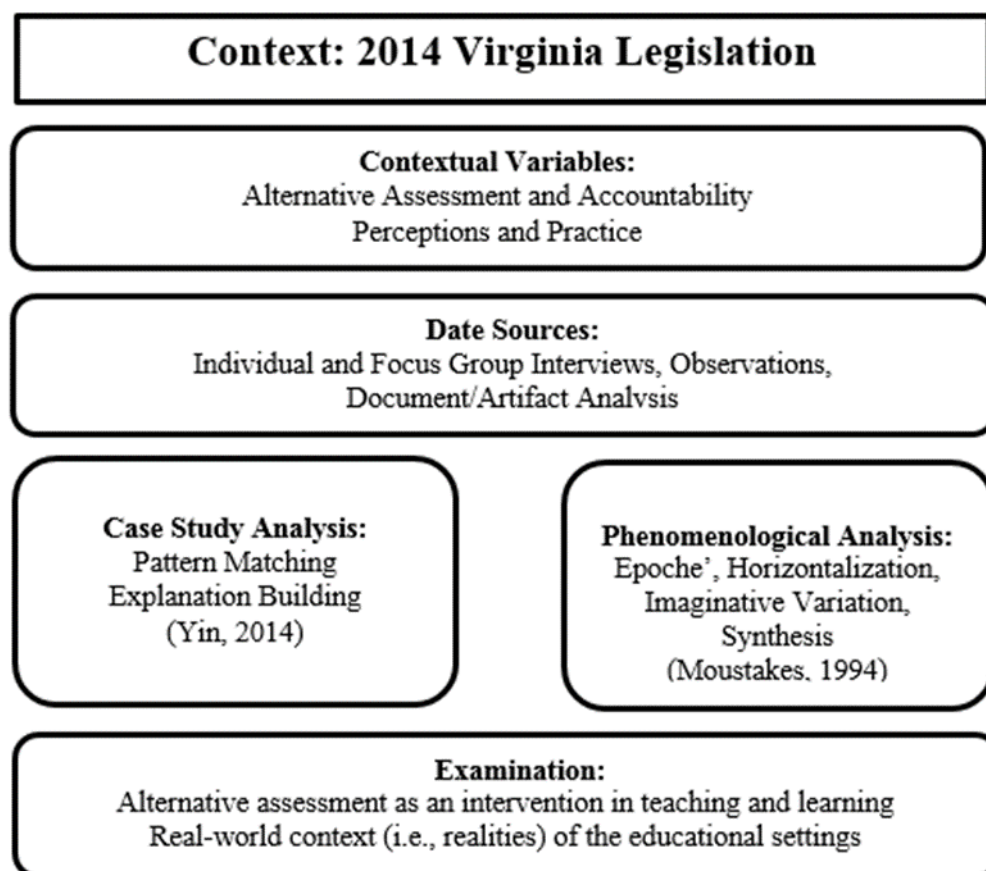
METHODOLOGY

As noted in Chapter I, the purpose of this research is to investigate one, large Virginia school district's implementation of alternative, locally developed assessments designed to supplant standardized measures, and the impact this has on a sub-set of middle school social studies teachers and division leaders. Emphasis is on the impact of policy change in social studies practice to capture perceptions of alternative assessment in relation to teaching and learning (i.e., practice). The research question, "How does reform focused on alternative assessment influence: (a) teachers' perceptions, and (b) educational practice?" served as the platform from which the study was designed and carried out. From this foundation, applying the contexts of the theoretical framework's educational environments (i.e., state, local district, and classroom) intentionally draws attention to the phenomenon of the 2014 legislation. Specifically, this framework represents the situation under which both state policy reform and local district-level decisions influence the immediate learning environment (i.e., the classroom) where student learning is most impacted.

In this chapter I offer a detailed account of the qualitative research traditions used to capture the voices and lived experiences of school district stakeholders in response to the 2014 Virginia assessment reform. For validation purposes, I triangulated data collected from three distinctive forms of data collection (i.e., interviews, observation, and document/artifact analysis) to capture participants' adaptations to the state's mandates. Subsequently, I used a qualitative framework featuring phenomenological analysis within case study to capture district stakeholders' accounts as they adapted to the state's policy reform. Multiple trustworthiness

strategies were enacted throughout the study to gain credibility. A visual, representing the methodological framework for this study, is detailed in Figure 3.1 below.

Figure 3.1 Methodology Framework: Phenomenological and Case Study Analyses



Phenomenology and Case Study Analyses: Context

Historically, qualitative researchers have blended phenomenology and case study as a means to satisfy their research agendas in a variety of fields and disciplines. Through a contemporary lens, researchers have used this approach to explore various phenomena in the field of education. For instance, studies have been enacted with specific populations, such as to research the longitudinal effects of trauma during adolescence and adulthood within gifted populations (Peterson, 2012, 2014) and to study the effects of literacy tutelage with struggling readers (Defeo & Caparas, 2014; Moreau 2014). Hickman and Kiss (2010, 2013) applied their

blended model within art education to study students' cross-curricular transfer of skills for conceptual understanding, and to explore the cognitive functions of various art-making processes. With respect to teaching interventions, Haber-Curran and Tillapaugh (2013) used a blended model to examine students' learning of leadership through action-inquiry and problem-based learning experiences, while Orosco and O'Connor (2014) studied the effects of culturally responsive, skills-based instruction with English Language Learners to accommodate learning disabilities.

In this case study, a shared grounding of examination through questioning (i.e., inquiry) provided a foundation for myself, curriculum leaders, and practitioners to discover interrelatedness among lived experiences within the same school division. As such, the complexity of this framework brought forth ideas quite possibly overlooked through other human sciences research (Dahlberg, Dahlberg & Nystrom, 2008). Specifically, case study and phenomenology analyses were complimentary during the investigation of alternative assessment reform as an intervention to teaching and learning. In reference to Figure 3.1, determining links between accountability at the district and classroom levels was primarily examined through case study analysis to determine the impacts on educational practice. Meanwhile, the investigation of participants' perceptions of the reform, and how these relate to practice, was primarily examined through a phenomenological framework. Findings from the analyses of both traditions shed light on shared communications, actions, and resources that gave new meaning to the phenomenon in a 21st century context. To this point in time, my use of the analyses to explore the effects of assessment reform on educational practice appears to be an underutilized approach.

Context: Department of Education Guidelines

The guidelines administered in the State Superintendent's Memo (October 24, 2014) referenced the recent legislation that replaced standardized assessments with alternative assessments in the following areas: Grade 3 History and Science, Grade 5 Writing; US History to 1865; and US History: 1865 to the Present. The anticipated expansion of authentic assessments that signify a new direction for the Commonwealth of Virginia was shared in the state superintendent's memo. I highlight the main ideas and accompanying details of the reform, each in turn, in the subsequent sections.

Accountability: The Code of Virginia

The Code of Virginia legislative guidelines specified the intentions with respect to accountability, coupled with guidelines on how the accountability was to be assumed at the division and classroom levels (VDOE, 2014). At the district level, each school board was required to annually certify the administration of an alternative assessment in each Standards of Learning (SOL) subject area in which an SOL assessment was not administered (grades 3-7). Highlighted in the legislative guidelines were suggestions for the following provisions:

- options for age-appropriate, authentic assessments with rubrics designed to ensure that students are making adequate academic progress in the subject area in which an SOL test was removed;
- integrated assessments that include multiple subject areas;
- collaboration between teachers to administer and substantiate the assessments; and
- professional development for teachers to make optimal use of alternative assessments.

District-level requirements. Along with the local control passed from the state to the district-level came a set of required actions to ensure the reform was carried out as intended. Although the use of performance-based assessments was encouraged in the Code of Virginia

legislative guidelines, it was not required, and additional formats may have been considered (e.g., portfolios, project-based). In the case of an audit from the state, documentation of the alternative assessment design and implementation processes was to be kept readily available in central office. For instance, this may include a chart showing alignment between the content strands and objectives and how they are assessed through an alternative task. Copies of alternative assessments, criterion rubrics, scored student samples, and all other ancillary materials used to provide professional development training were also to be kept in a place of accessibility. Knowing that a district's implementation process was likely to undergo future refinements, all considerations beyond the 2015-2016 school year were to be communicated with the state.

Classroom-level requisites. Accountability at the classroom level calls for the increased use of assessments designed to inform instruction in order for teachers to assume new methods of teaching and learning that meet the reform goals. Also encouraged is teachers' intentional use of assessment data to enhance instructional delivery. Teachers' instructional decisions should be guided by these data collected intermittently throughout the school year to best meet students' needs. With a renewed focus on the teaching process and student outcomes, the progression calls for teachers to engage in the establishment of student learning targets designed to gauge students' proficiency of student progress and continuously monitor progress through the means of formative assessment.

A significant variable in the context of this study is that of "local control" – the authority over the alternative assessments passed from the state to the district level – which has enabled each school district to decide on the alternative assessment format (i.e., performance and project-based assessments with rubrics, portfolios). Results from the case study conducted by Abbott

(2015) at the local district level revealed the decision of the school board to develop authentic performance-based assessments featuring real-life situations that transcend multiple content areas (e.g., social studies and writing). During the first trial school year of 2014-2015, students were issued the performance-based assessments at multiple points during the months of February to June.

The State Superintendent's memo encourages each division to first evaluate teachers' capacity to design and manage the alternative assessments, then support their associated needs through ongoing professional development (VDOE, 2014). My previous study (Abbott, 2015) revealed the initiatives of central office personnel in recognition of the division's state of readiness. Interventions were made to fill the gaps of performance tasks in curriculum and provide necessary resources and training for teachers. Results also revealed the value in collaboration (i.e., within schools, across district schools, and among divisions in each region of the state) and the professional development necessary during the time of initial implementation.

Support for the Legislation

Recognized as uncharted territory for the state of Virginia, opportunities for collaboration and support were enacted for various stakeholders. Division leaders, curriculum coordinators, and teachers from across the region gathered in various venues to navigate these new conditions. Key findings from the state/regional and district meetings, based on my previous study, are outlined in the subsequent sections.

The state/regional level. In early 2015, a \$21,250 grant was awarded from the state, allowing the region to solicit support and resources necessary for alternative assessment implementation. Planning meetings were initially attended by deputy/assistant superintendents and representative education faculty from several regionally-based research universities to

facilitate the direction of how the regions would carry out their training initiatives. During a March 2015 regional session, curriculum coordinators representing the regional districts, each with four teacher representatives from the affected subject areas, met for a briefing on the legislative expectations. After a full day of professional development on assessment literacy, ample time was set-aside the following day for district collaboration and construction of alternative assessments, respective to the needs of staff and students. Regional collaboration was conducted through grade/content area “breakout” training groups, where the teachers were provided support and training by local university professors. This collaboration was sustained throughout the remainder of the school year and carried over into the 2015-2016 school year upon an extension of the grant.

The district level. In January of 2015, a memo released to middle school administrators invited 6th and 7th grade social studies teachers to apply and become members of an Alternative Assessment Development Committee. For the remainder of the school year, these teachers constructed the new alternative assessments, and refined previously issued performance-based assessments used for formative purposes in the classroom.

During an April school board training workshop, the school board, superintendent, and central office personnel gathered for a briefing on the division’s plan to meet the state’s mandates outlined in the 2014 legislation. Performance-based and alternative assessment tasks, designed to supplant each of the five areas impacted by the legislation, were shared. The attendees remarked on the students’ real world engagement with skills and processes in writing, communication, conducting research, making inferences with images, and drawing conclusions.

Planning for the 2015-2016 School Year

To ensure compliance with the state's mandates, each local school board and superintendent submitted a Standards of Quality report to the state, outlining the school division's plan of action. Documentation of teacher training materials, student samples, assessment tasks and accompanying rubrics, were kept available should staff from the Department of Education conduct a desk review (i.e., site visit) at any point during the school year. The directors of Elementary and Secondary Teaching and Learning in particular were tasked with the safekeeping of pertinent documentation. Any plans for expansion and reform from one school year to the next were to be documented and disclosed.

This study investigates the same school district, Landstone City Public Schools, as the previously conducted study (Abbott, 2015) to investigate the expansion of the phenomenon with greater depth and breadth. For example, findings of the previous study revealed a professional development "action plan" in its final stages, designed to provide support and interventions for teachers affected by the reform. Plans for mandatory professional development workshop sessions during the summer months prior to the 2015-2016 school year were approved by the superintendent and local school board. During the professional development sessions, teachers were projected to gain the practice needed to produce high-quality assessments, use criterion scoring rubrics, and engage in data-informed decision-making processes to further drive instruction. In this study, a follow-up to these workshops uncovered the district's attempt to bridge the gap that commonly exists between policy and practice (Cuban, 2013).

Philosophical Assumptions

This research was deeply rooted in a constructivist paradigm, to which meaning was developed from the shared experiences between stakeholders (Von Glasersfeld, 2005) represented in the exosystem (district) and microsystem (classroom) levels of the Educational

Environments Theoretical Framework (i.e., Figure 1.1). The nature of knowing is oftentimes a contentious aspect in qualitative research, to which researchers hold varying positions (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Within the constructivist research paradigm, Guba and Lincoln discuss the features of voice as a “facilitator of reconstruction,” serving as a catalyst for action or change, and the formative nature of constructivist research to collectively establish meaning and understanding through consensus. To that end, a primary focus of this study was the examination of complex relationships that exist between the state policy and the division, the division leaders and teachers, and teachers with students. Additionally, the meaning of alternative assessments as living objects or things was captured through the participants’ shared perspectives.

The Educational Environments theoretical framework played an integral role while conducting my qualitative research, serving as a guide toward the discovery of unique and detailed assumptions related to educational knowledge, conceptions, and realities. For instance, my ability to work through ethical and political issues that reside in education was captured during the stages of collecting and analyzing data, mainly through my bridling attempts (Vagle, 2009). The multiple realities of alternative assessment in education were acknowledged through the documented perspectives (i.e., voices and words) of central office personnel and social studies teachers. Although these agents, or the community of agents, unpacked the legislation and reform mandates during professional development training, it is likely these stakeholders would not share the exact same conceptualizations of alternative assessment practices in education. The variances in their realities as they relate to classroom practice and student learning are shared in the form of themes, which I present through a narration of findings in Chapter IV.

In the presence of this study is the ontological belief that within the multiple realities accompanying the phenomenon, “the experience a person has includes the way in which the experience is interpreted,” which can be applied to both researcher and participants (Merriam, 2009, p. 9). To prevent my assumptions from shaping the study’s findings, my values and inquiries were fully disclosed through bridling journal entries. My decision to cast aside pre-determined notions and biases was necessary to obtain untainted interpretations of my participants and their experiences. In an initial bridling journal entry, I reflected on the following:

I find bridling to be a natural occurrence of any researcher studying a phenomenon to which there is some element of experience through simply being human. I share Vagle’s vision of bridling, particularly as I craft my findings (i.e., text) and structure them through the essence of meaning in such a way that a reader could see him or herself in the phenomenon itself.....making it true and real (bridling journal entry, 11-05-15).

Participants’ unique perspectives and circumstances were valued as they were revealed during individual conversations and focus group experiences and provided for shared meaning of the phenomenon.

The epistemological assumptions, or the perceived ways in which knowledge is constructed, become essential to interpreting the influences of policy on student learning at the levels within the theoretical framework. Therefore, the epistemic beliefs of central office and social studies teachers in particular were explored. Participants’ belief systems, or epistemological frameworks, become central to the study’s findings – the issues addressed, decisions made, and actions taken with regard to policy implementation.

Research Design

There is a naturalistic element in qualitative research to which data are collected in real-world settings under common, every day conditions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Denzin and Lincoln posit qualitative research as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” and “consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” through a transformation (p. 3). During my attempts to interpret the developed meanings of the phenomenon held by my participants, this study came to life through a natural unfolding without a previously established course (Patton, 2002).

In this research I relied on the tradition of case study to describe the ways in which various educational environments have been impacted by the 2014 legislation. In the subsequent section, I provide a historical grounding of the tradition to establish depth and breadth outside the scope of this study, mainly to showcase comparisons among its founding. *The case*, represented by the sub-set of stakeholders (i.e., middle school social studies teachers and district leaders) responsible for enacting the reform, was broken down in detail to establish the boundaries of the phenomenon. In conclusion, I provide full transparency by unveiling my background experiences and immediate thoughts regarding the overarching topic of alternative assessment.

The Case Study Tradition

Shared and distinct characteristics emerge upon synthesizing the historical, theoretical perspectives of case study authors such as Stake (1995, 2005), Merriam (2009), and Yin (2014). Agreeably, “a case” has functions with working parts, oftentimes interrelated, to which sequences and patterns oftentimes emerge. Merriam and Stake directly reference a case as “a unit” such as a person, group, situation, organization, or even event. All three authors’ views are in accordance with case study being grounded in inquiry. For example, Stake and Yin

acknowledge that case study research is most appropriate when investigating “how” and “why” research questions, and that a case is uniquely based on time, place, and circumstances.

Merriam, on the other hand, directly ties inquiry to “the unit of analysis” – a bounded system that “defines the case” – to which the interactions among factors of the phenomenon are to be uncovered (pp. 42-43). As a result, the tradition can be combined with another (e.g. phenomenology) when appropriate and rationalized by the focus of the study (e.g., to capture lived experiences).

Shared among authors is the view of analysis, which requires rich descriptions, holistic in nature, to deeply describe the working parts of the case. However, the minor dissimilarities among their philosophies bring an element of diversity to the tradition. Although all three agree there can be a single case, or multiple cases under analysis, there are distinctive views regarding investigation. Conducting a case study can be cumbersome, particularly as the process becomes intertwined with the case itself, and even the final product (Merriam, 2009). While Yin’s main focus is on the empirical process to investigate the phenomenon, Stake’s main attempt is to clearly define the case as “the product.” Merriam, on the other hand, emphasizes strategy, or the unit(s) of analysis used to fence in the case. To add contrast, Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014) focus on the study of a case, valuing how it is positioned in a larger context and acknowledge what “will not be studied.” More broadly, case study is acknowledged as one of the most complex of all research traditions as a result of its unstructured guidelines. Stake (1995) for example, resorts to four platforms of analysis to aggregate categories, and identify patterns, natural generalizations, and direct interpretations. However, for the purposes of this study I draw from the theories and workings of Merriam and Yin as they best attend to the aims of my research and analysis of data.

The tradition of case study in this qualitative research study is grounded in the expansion of educational theory (Yin, 2014). My focus is narrowed through recognition of the case as “a thing” to which boundaries exist and the phenomenon under study becomes boxed in (Merriam, 2009). In the end this allows the case to be intensively analyzed for a holistic description, more concrete than abstract and quite contextual with experiences.

A case study design was appropriately selected for this study based on what can be revealed regarding the variable of local control granted by the state’s legislation. Bounding the 2014 legislation within a single school district allowed the focus of its impact to remain on staff and their educational practice. An explanatory, analytic approach could have drawn attention toward phenomenological conditions, or an exploratory approach might have been used to track the operations over time; however, I have embraced the ideals of a descriptive analysis to study the phenomenon in its real-world context (Yin, 2014). Utilizing a descriptive approach resulted in a final product, heuristic in nature, that “illuminates the reader’s understanding of the phenomenon” (Merriam, 2009, p. 44). According to Yin (2014), one particular advantage of case study is the ability to focus on inquiry regarding contemporary events, such as the 2014 legislation, to which researchers have no control over or ability to manipulate behaviors. Moreover, a “unique strength” that separates case study from other qualitative traditions may very well be “its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence – documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations” (p. 12).

Assuming a realist perspective throughout the study allowed me to cast aside speculation, and entertain possibilities of multiple realities that illuminate the topic of study. To that end, the case study approach was used as a means to explain the extent in which alternative assessment served as an intervention to teaching and learning. These interventions can be best described in

the real world context of both the district (exosystem) and classroom (microsystem) levels, bounded within the case.

The case. One large Virginia school district, Landstone City Public Schools, was selected to serve as the investigation site in this study. The local school division was conveniently selected based on my access as an insider. It serves as a suburban district with over 70,000 students attending more than 80 elementary, middle, and high schools. Diversity was featured among cultures, special programming (i.e., gifted, ELL, special education, academies) and socio-economic status (see Context Chapter). The district's school board seats 12 members, to include the high-ranking, leadership positions of Chairman and Superintendent. Residing in the district's central office are the superintendent, assistant superintendent and cabinet, and various essential departments that oversee a myriad of responsibilities across the city. One specific department germane to this study is Teaching and Learning, which is divided into elementary and secondary offices. The previously conducted case study (Abbott, 2015) captured a general understanding of the district leadership's response to the 2014 legislation during the first trial 2014-2015 school year. The participants represented the four primary central office positions tasked with organizing a plan to meet the state's reform mandates. The devised action plan provided a foundational understanding of where the district was headed into the 2015-2016 school year.

This study allows for further expansion of the initial findings from the previous study by providing the space for classroom teachers' firsthand accounts with the phenomenon. Within the case, the unit of analysis at the forefront of the study (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014) is that of alternative assessments as they are intended to serve as an intervention to enhance teaching and learning.

The Researcher

In this qualitative case study, I served as the key instrument, bringing to the study my personal experiences and inquiry as important parts to understanding the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). The actions of entering the field to collect data, interpret the data, and share findings, were all in effort to capture a rich description of the phenomenon. Ultimately, meaning was socially constructed between participants, however, I positioned myself in the research to acknowledge how my personal past and present experiences helped shape the interpretations of the findings. As a 36-year-old Caucasian female, I currently reside as a doctoral candidate in a Curriculum and Instruction program at a large, four-year research-extensive university. Additionally, I serve as a high school gifted resource teacher in a collegiate, international baccalaureate setting in the district which bounds this case study. It is my 10 years of experience teaching elementary and middle school grades impacted by SOL testing that adds a layer of understanding to the classroom culture as it has been impacted by the policy reform.

Philosophy of Teaching and Learning

My personal convictions toward curriculum, instruction, and assessment were significantly shaped during the years spent obtaining a National Board Certification in the middle childhood years of 7 to 12. The rigors of this process caused me to capitalize on a system of balanced assessments (i.e., pre-assessments, formative assessments, performance tasks, summative assessments) as a means to drive the teaching and learning process. My epistemological beliefs to embrace alternative assessment methods in my practice matured significantly at this stage in my professional career.

I believe fostering a constructivist classroom climate affords students opportunities to acquire knowledge through inquiry and make meaning with higher-order skill sets through a

student-centered approach. I maintain a strong belief that assessment of student transfer of knowledge should be captured through an alternative approach to multiple-choice, in all core disciplines. Teaching through an interdisciplinary manner is a best practice and a way to reinforce transferable and conceptual knowledge. Furthermore, I value bringing real-world situations into the classroom is an ideal way to obtain rigor and relevance, while bridging the gap between school and society. Years of first-hand experience with SOL pressures have significantly shaped my philosophy.

Standards-Based Teaching Climate

Throughout my classroom experiences teaching fifth and sixth grade, weeks of preparation time in early spring were spent preparing for end-of-year SOL tests in each core subject area. The reinforcement of isolated bits of knowledge and test-taking strategies were exhausting, yet essential to the process. Unfortunately, teaching the stated curriculum came to a crawl weeks prior to taking the SOL tests. Teaching and learning time was supplanted with numerous multiple-choice practice tests, issued one after the other, in every core subject area. Teachers concerned about the toll this process took on students' morale attempted to make the most of the situation by turning review questions into classroom games to make SOL test preparation less daunting.

Pressure to achieve high numbers of passing scores was enough to instill a negative perception towards standardized testing for teachers and students alike. From my perspective, the amount of precious time lost in teaching enriching content was difficult to bear. I can recall the domino effect of stress placed upon administrators, which trickled down to teachers, then to students, and even parents, temporarily altering the typically relaxed ambience of the teaching

and learning environment. Nonetheless, standardized tests should not engender tears of anxiety, which I have witnessed firsthand.

Professional Development Facilitator

Over the years, I have worked extensively with the topic of alternative assessment. My work includes memberships on various curriculum development committees to which alternative and performance-based formats of assessment were valued (i.e., performance tasks, portfolios, problem and project-based learning). As a district trainer, my professional development training sessions with teachers consisted of the following topics: creation of performance-based tasks and rubric development, teacher-scorer training, and leadership in student data analysis procedures. Embedded in my epistemic belief system is the role of alternative assessment as a best teaching practice to gain formative data for instructional use and delivery of student feedback.

Data Collection

My role as the researcher in the data collection stage was much like that of a detective, carefully planning each move in the processes upon entry and exiting the field. A firm grasp of the purpose and issues being studied aided in the detection of clues and interpretation of data as they were collected. For example, two separate instances required follow-up communication with participants on initial inferences that recognized further corroboration and clarification of possible contradictory information (Yin, 2014). An interplay between the theoretical framework and experiences within the case was essential in capturing a holistic understanding of my participants' engagement with the phenomenon.

Due to the detailed nature of conducting case study, thorough descriptions regarding the district, schools, and participants are provided in Chapter IV. The subsequent paragraphs were purposefully composed to provide a brief overview.

Site Selections and Participant Populations

Prior to entering the field, I sought necessary permissions, support and attention from various gatekeepers and key informants. First, human subject research required formal permission to ensure the adherence of ethical research standards; therefore, exempt status was secured through submission to the College of Education's Human Subjects Review Committee. Only after the college review process was underway could I submit a research application to the school district's Research Review Committee for an extensive 10-week approval process. The school district's Assessment Specialist served as the point of contact for communication regarding the status and issuance of clearance. Marking the official beginning of the data collection process was the anticipated arrival of the approval letter from the Human Subjects Review Committee in August 2015 and the district Assistant Superintendent in October 2015.

Research was conducted in two diverse educational environments featured in the theoretical framework. First, the exosystem level of the local district was represented by the Department of Teaching and Learning, featuring participants that oversee all curriculum-related assessment processes for the division. Next, the phenomenon was studied in its purest form at the microsystem level, consisting of multiple sixth and seventh grade social studies classrooms in the middle school setting.

While district leaders shared their story of how the alternative assessments came into existence and made their way into the classrooms, social studies teachers could share their lived experiences of the responsibilities associated with preparing students for their implementation of alternative assessments in their classrooms. It was in the middle school social studies classrooms where teachers engaged in their practice and had the most immediate influence on the core of the Educational Environments theoretical framework – student learning. My objective upon entering

these classrooms included the search for evidence in the alignment between instructional methods and assessment policy reform, mainly through the teaching and learning that supported or hindered the preparation for administering alternative assessments.

District leaders: Central office personnel. Purposeful, criterion sampling was used to select three district leadership participants, out of the six existing instructional leadership positions, in the Teaching and Learning Department. These central office positions featured the Chief Academic Officer, the Secondary Supervisor of Teaching and Learning, and the Secondary Social Studies Curriculum Coordinator. These participants were selected as participants based on their active involvement in overseeing the implementation of the locally developed alternative assessments and managing the development processes of the assessments in social studies at the middle school level since 2014. Notably, this sample served as “the population,” exhausting all possible participants from this stakeholder group at the microsystem level, and served as participants in the previous study (Abbott, 2015). Through follow-up interviews, their participation offered updates regarding the details and perspectives related to the phenomenon.

Classroom teachers: 6th/7th grade social studies. Criterion and convenience sampling was used to solicit a group of six middle school social studies teachers, with three representatives from 6th and 7th grade social studies classrooms, respectively. A range of teaching experience was carefully considered in the final selection of participants, bringing significant contrast to the findings. To solicit teachers as primary participants, a request was made via email to three middle schools featuring diverse demographics amongst staff and students.

A list of potential participants, representing diversity with teaching experience and styles, was solicited from the principals. Criterion for stratifying the possible number of participants was twofold. First, potential teacher participants were active with the implementation of

alternative assessments since their inception to the curriculum in the spring of 2015; this excluded any first year teachers. Only full-time teachers could assume the responsibility of administering the performance-based assessments intermittently to accompany major social studies units of study and curricular themes (i.e., civil rights) throughout the 2015-2016 school year. Second, potential participants must have attended the mandatory professional development training offered from June through September of 2015 by district personnel. Although the sample number of 6th/7th grade social studies teachers was small, compared to the approximately 50-70 teachers in the potential district population, it was suitable for a phenomenological study to provide ample detail for a holistic understanding of the case.

Data Sources: Preliminary Matters upon Entering the Field

Within this qualitative study, a platform was established to make direct contact with the participants and settings that constituted the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2002). Featured in Table 3.1 is an overview of the triangulation, or convergence of findings from multiple data sources (i.e., interviews, observations, and documents), used to increase confirmation and credibility throughout the study (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014).

Throughout the study I was fortunate to serve in the capacity of diverse roles – an interviewer, observer, and document analyst. Such roles and means of collecting pertinent data were complimentary and meaningful to provide a thick description of the educational environments and their influences on student learning. With regard to the phenomenon, data analysis occurred on two levels which I describe, each in turn, later in this chapter. The variance in methods afforded me the opportunity to focus on alternative assessment, serving as a catalyst to enhance teaching and learning and embedded within the real-world context (i.e., reality) of the classroom setting.

Table 3.1 Data Collection Points

Interviews	Observations	Documents
Primary Interviews <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12 semi-structured individual sessions; *2 interviews with each of the six teachers; audio-recorded in natural settings (i.e., classrooms) 	12 observations of classroom instruction; *2 visits with each of the six teachers 3 observations of alternative assessments being administered *6th Grade-2 observations; 7th Grade-1 observation	State Materials <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Standards of Learning Objectives (2012 changes) State Superintendent's Memo (2014)
Secondary Interviews <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 semi-structured, focus group sessions; one each with 6th and 7th grade teachers in a natural settings (i.e., classroom) 1 semi-structured, focus group session with district leaders in a natural setting (i.e., central office) 	2 observations of professional learning community (PLC) alternative assessment scoring sessions *6th Grade-1 observation; 7th Grade-1 observation	District Materials <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Superintendent's Executive Summary Secondary Teaching and Learning Resources Strategic Plan Professional development resources 6th grade alternative assessments (4) 7th grade alternative assessments (4)
		Teacher Materials <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instructional handouts; agendas Pictures of the learning environment Samples of student work Instructional strategies

Entering the field. Prior to the study, I sent a cover letter and informed consent to each participant clearly outlining the intentions of the study (see Appendix A). Two discrete versions were generated based the level of participation in the study: social studies teachers served as

primary participants associated with the majority of data collection, while the district leaders served as secondary participants through follow-up interviews. Each informed consent fully disclosed the protocols and procedures for security of data, anonymity, and opt-out procedures. Additionally, a demographic sheet (see Appendix B) accompanied the documents in order to obtain critical information regarding educational positions, responsibilities, and related experiences. Although there were no monetary gains or incentives offered for participation in the study, the experience had potential to aid in personal and professional growth.

Due to the timeliness of aligning the study with the phenomenon during the first semester of the 2015-2016 school year, a timeline was generated to span out the data collection points while working in the field (see Table 3.2 below). After obtaining research approvals in September and October, I entered the field to initiate data collection in October of 2015 and completed data collection by the end of December 2015.

Table 3.2 Data Collection Timeline

TASK	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
Research Approval (i.e., IRB, District Research Application)	✓	✓		
Contact School Administrators, Solicit Participants		✓		
Observations of Teachers' Working in PLCs				✓
Observations of Teachers' Classroom Instruction			✓	✓
Individual Interviews			✓ (R1)	✓ (R2)
Focus Group Interview- District Leaders				✓
Focus Group Interviews- 6th/7th Grade Teachers				✓
Observation of Alternative Assessments Administered				✓
Artifact/Document Analysis	✓	✓	✓	

R = Interview Round

Qualitative Interviews

Conducting interviews in qualitative research can be characterized as knowledge producing through an engagement in social practice (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) and a way of capturing the context of personal experiences (Seidman, 2006). In qualitative inquiry there is a genuine interest in “understanding social phenomena from the actors’ own perspectives and describing the world as experienced by the subjects...” to which there lies “the assumption that the important reality is what people perceive it to be” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 26). Participants’ knowledge can be buried, to which the researcher uses his or her tools to unearth such valuables.

Interview protocol. I relied on a blending of the philosophies and interview formats of Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), Weiss (2009), and Seidmann (2006) to capture both individual meaning and social construction of participants’ realities. Adapted from the ideas of Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), salient aspects of the qualitative interview process included the following:

- Life world: the topic is aligned with the everyday lived world of the interviewees and their relation to it (i.e., philosophy and practice of teaching);
- Meaning: interpretation of central themes in the life world of the phenomenon based on what is shared and how well it is stated (i.e., assessment, accountability);
- Description: attempt to capture distinct descriptions of the phenomenon that exist in the participants’ life worlds (i.e., classrooms, central office);
- Specificity: detailed descriptions of concrete situations and action sequences; and
- Positive Experience: a well conducted interview may enrich interviewees’ life worlds and gain new insights into their respective situations (i.e., practices). (p. 28)

In terms of frequency, Weiss (2009) suggests conducting more than one interview with interviewees to allow a relationship or partnership to take hold. A second interview, and even a third, are deemed worthwhile, especially as frequent contact creates a broadened frame of reference for the researcher and a willingness of a participant to report more fully. Similar in theory, Seidmann (2006) emphasizes use of “The Three Interview Series” with respect to open-ended questions through “in depth phenomenologically based interviewing” (p. 15). The goal is to conduct three separate interviews with participants: Interview 1 capturing the context of experience, Interview 2 reconstructing experiences within the context, and Interview 3 involving reflection on personal meaning within the experience. There is logic to this method as each interview is valued for the provision of details that illuminate the next. However, Seidmann claims there is no one absolute, qualitative interview structure. As long as an interview structure is “maintained “ that allows participants to reconstruct and reflect upon their experience within the context of their lives, alterations to the three interview structure can be made.

First-person accounts from real life experiences have historically served as the critical evidence in phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994). In the context of this research, all participants were asked to explain their experiences in complying with the state’s reform mandates, in addition to influential contexts or situations that may have affected their experiences in the workplace. Specifically, the research question and the Educational Environments framework were used to generate interview protocols (see Appendix C) for individual and focus group interviews. Questions for the individual interview protocol were strategically crafted to gather descriptive data that highlight the nuances of individual experiences, while the focus group protocol was designed to feature participants’ shared experiences. Direct questions through a semi-structured design were asked, such as “When you

think about alternative assessment, what comes to mind?” (i.e., individual interview) and “What future changes might you anticipate with the reform?” (i.e., focus group interview).

Slight adjustments to the interviewing through probing were used during critical moments to gain more details or examples, especially when the conversation was moving along a fruitful path (Merriam, 2009). Throughout the interview, it was my role to further develop the conversation through gestures that allowed me to obtain specific information related to the inquiry protocol. Oftentimes, I used Weiss’s (1994) tactic of “extending” through a phrase such as “Can you tell me what that might look like?” and “filling in detail” by recapping what the interviewer said, and/or followed by a question such as “What else could you share with me about that?” Occasionally I found myself “making indications explicit” when an interviewee gave a sign of confusion or long critical thought, which I offered through restating the question in different words, giving a nod of value and/or asking for elaboration of the question.

Interviews were conducted in the natural settings of classrooms or central office during a time that was most convenient and selected by the participants. Prior to asking the first question of each interview, I made it a point to ensure the participant(s) consented to my recording of our conversation. During recorded sessions, two audio recorders were present in the room, started immediately after greetings and turned off after my expressed appreciation for support. A Contact Summary Sheet (Appendix D) was used as a management tool to summarize an interview, organizer potential categories and discrepancies, outline salient interview moments, and compare data across interviews.

Primary interviews: Individual teachers. Individual interviews, using a semi-structured, life world interview protocol, were similar to having “an everyday conversation” regarding “the lived everyday world from the subjects’ own perspectives” yet professionally

defined through a specific approach and technique (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 27). Such an approach provided for a closer connection with the phenomenon and a rich, thick description of the case in the end. The Figure 3.2 below features a complete data collection time table of all visits with participants.

Figure 3.2 Data Collection Time Table

Data Collection	Participants and Dates					
Individual Interviews	Jill- 5 November, 2015 19 November, 2015	Morgan- 5 November, 2015 19 November, 2015	Bob- 12 November, 2015 3 December, 2015	Steve- 5 November, 2015 3 December, 2015	Deedra- 12 November, 2015 3 December, 2015	Lisa- 11 November, 2015 23 November, 2015
Focus Group Interviews	District Leaders- 1 December, 2015		6 th Grade- 22 December, 2015		7 th Grade- 22 December, 2015	
Classroom Observations	Jill- 11 November, 2015 4 December, 2015	Morgan- 16 November, 2015 4 December, 2015	Bob- 20 November, 2015 21 December, 2015	Steve- 23 November, 2015 2 December, 2015	Deedra- 20 November, 2015 2 December, 2015	Lisa- 20 November, 2015 7 December, 2015
PLC Observations	6 th Grade- 10 December, 2015			7 th Grade- 21 December, 2015		
Alternative Assessment Enactment	6 th Grade- 7 December, 2015 2 Classroom Visits; Steve, Lisa			7 th Grade- 21 December, 2015; 1 Classroom Visit; Bob		

Individual interviews were held with three 6th and three 7th grade social studies teachers for approximately 45-60 minutes on two separate occasions (see Table 3.3). Interviews with each primary participant (i.e., teacher) were spaced out every seven to twelve days due to scheduling availability, which was slightly more than Seidman's (2006) recommendation of three to seven days. The aim was to gain perspectives independent from others (Yin, 2014) and compare the similarities and differences of perceptions over time. As a result of my experiences associated with the previous study (Abbott, 2015), I was able to move the conversations from a superficial level to a place of depth and complexity. Questions followed a fluid, unbiased line of

inquiry that captured interviewees' interpretations and perceptions regarding the implementation of alternative assessments in practice. Approximately 8-10 semi-structured interview questions were generated to capture an in-depth understanding of the research question and a holistic understanding of the overall case. To begin, teachers were asked questions about their roles in the classroom, goals for the teaching and learning of social studies, and comparisons of the old versus new methods of assessment (i.e., SOL vs. alternative assessments). Next, several questions directly related to the phenomenon and research question were asked, such as: "How do students prepare for the performance-based assessments?" and "Can you describe any ways this policy reform has affected your practice?"

Focus group interviews. I relied on the constructivist model during the last round of interviews – the focus group – consisting of participants of the same grade level or department. My aim was to capture the shared knowledge and meaning between individuals and their environment, to which constraints and conditions could cause individuals to "evolve a fit" or adapt (Von Glasersfeld, 2005). The social constructivist worldview in particular was reflected through my efforts to capture processes conducted in specific educational contexts (i.e., classroom and central office) to which historical and cultural meaning could be derived (Creswell, 2013).

Focus group interviews: Teachers. In this study, two separate focus group interviews were conducted with all three sixth and three seventh grade teachers, in search of a range of perspectives and experiences and to detect emerging patterns. The nature of a focus group called for a shared protocol, to which participants could juxtapose their views in relation to others'. This was largely the case in my pursuit of consulting the most highly qualified individuals to gain quality data that addressed the research question (Merriam, 2009).

Moderated focus group discussions on the 2014 legislation were purposefully scheduled last to corroborate findings from the individual interviews (Yin, 2014). These rounds relied on Krueger's (1994) focus group protocol that began with one question for all: "Can you compare your initial reactions toward the reform to your perceptions now?" The session then broke into questions to be answered voluntarily, with an opportunity to build from one another's ideas and present diverse perspectives. The session concluded in a final round with a common question regarding any changes in perception of their subject area and practice. At the heart of the focus group is a carefully designed route of questioning serving as a rich source of data at a practical cost (Kreuger, 1994). Kreuger explains the advantages of entertaining inquiry in such a social setting to "tap into the real-life interactions of people and allow the researcher to get in touch with participants' perceptions, attitudes, and opinions in a way that other procedures do not allow" (p. 238). Conversely, focus groups can be limiting when respondents feel restrained with time and sheer numbers of participants and questions, minority viewpoints may be stifled or receive disapproval, and anonymity cannot be assured. To encourage in-depth conversations approximately 60-minute focus group interviews were conducted through a semi-structured format of 7-9 questions. A comfortable and private location in the school was selected, one in which disturbances were minimized and the setting was familiar. A variety of meeting dates and times were offered through electronic means (i.e., group email), to which all participants had a stake in finalizing meeting dates and times.

Focus group interview: Central office personnel (secondary participants). The follow-up interview to the Abbott (2015) study allowed me to gain a better understanding of how the district's action plan to meet state policy reform mandates transitioned from the trial period of 2014-2015 into the 2015-2016 school year. The protocol was strategically designed to first build

from the previous study's results for further elaboration on topics such as: professional development, administration of the alternative assessments, communication with school administrators and teachers, and collaboration within the region of Virginia. Secondly, new territory was covered during the interview while addressing teacher accountability, perceptions of the alternative assessments, and future refinements with scoring processes.

The approximately 60-minute interview was held during a convenient time at the district's Teaching and Learning Department in the central office. Three out of the four district leaders from the previous study were in attendance. Unfortunately, one member was called away at the last moment to address immediate department matters. Approximately 7-9, semi-structured questions, designed with intentions to address key topics regarding the reform, included the following: "Since the performance-based assessments have been enacted, what feedback have you received?" "With regard to alternative assessment in this district, where is the emphasis (content, skills, or both)?" and "Can you describe what teachers' accountability looks like?" The lived experiences of those within the exosystem became quite complimentary to the study in order to describe *the case*, and compare/contrast with teachers' experiences within the macrosystem.

Observations

Field experiences in this phenomenological case study were descriptive to bring greater meaning to my researcher accounts through explanation building and pattern finding (Yin, 2015). Additionally, the observations provided a deeper understanding of the teachers' behaviors referenced during individual and focus group interviews. My search called for an interplay between a focus on academic tasks (content and skills), learning targets for students, and the discourse and affectiveness between teacher and students.

Observational analysis is purposeful in providing sufficient depth and detail of the setting through context, so much that specific incidents and behaviors that have become routine and overlooked by participants can be observed firsthand through a researcher's fresh perspective (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, anecdotal notes were captured using the Field Note Template (see Appendix E) featuring facts and sensory details of the site, a description of chronological events, followed by an overall reflection of the experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Specifically, observations were conducted after interviews for purposes of corroboration and as a follow-up measure to participants' shared accounts (i.e., practice, administering and scoring tasks) (see Table 3.3). Two distinct types of field experiences, in classrooms and professional learning community sessions, are described in the subsequent sections for purposes of bringing greater meaning to the study's findings.

Classroom observation protocol-The critical incident technique. The concept of the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) was used to shape the observation protocol in this study. Historically, this technique derived from combat leadership studies conducted during and post-World War II in search of credible evidence during field performances. The technique has since developed in government, business, psychology, and educational projects to study actions in various professions, using criteria to determine acceptable performances.

According to Flanagan (1954), "it should be noted that the critical incident technique is very flexible and the principles underlying it have many types of applications" (p. 354). In this study's context the "typical performance" of implementing alternative assessment for effective student learning serves as the focus. Specific criteria featured from the literature in Chapter II served as guiding prompts of teachers' actions in the classroom. Upon observation, the critical requirements serving as measures were the elements of:

- Traditional versus alternative assessment (Anderson, 1998);
- Formative assessment practices and feedback (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Cauley & McMillan, 2010; Hattie & Timperley, 2007);
- Alternative versus traditional assessment beliefs and assumptions (Anderson, 1998); and
- Qualities of exemplary social studies practice (Libresco et al., 2014).

To prevent the collection of my own personal judgments or opinions, I generated a “record of specific behaviors” serving as the “critical requirements of the activity” (Flanagan, p. 355). The guidance featured in Table 3.3 provided a lens through which I could engage in the observation protocol to document specific classroom behaviors and actions, or the lack thereof.

Table 3.3 Observational Record of Behaviors and Critical Requirements

Pedagogical Behaviors and Actions	Supporting Theorists
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis on process vs. product; • Teacher facilitated learning; • Active learning process for students 	Anderson, 1998
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alternative assessment formats administered formatively; • Continuous access to feedback (teacher and students); • Learning tasks and questioning strategies that provide data; • Acquired information about understandings and misunderstandings 	Black & Wiliam, 1998 Hattie & Timperley, 2007 Cauley and McMillan, 2010
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employ a range of assessment tools; • Emphasize skills instruction; • Integrate social studies with other subjects 	Libresco et al., 2014

The purpose of the protocol was to provide a focus on a specific component of the phenomenon – alternative assessment – as it relates to the competencies in teachers’ practice that foster its implementation. The five-step process of the critical incident procedure, as it was originally intended for use, is similar to how it was implemented in this study:

1. The general aim of the activity – a generated statement most authorities or experts in the field would approve of, was established (e.g., Alternative assessments are designed for students to demonstrate proficiency of content knowledge and specific skill sets);
2. The plans to collect data on factual events and the standards for classifying the behavior (based on literature) were developed in the observation protocol template;
3. Data was collected first through interviews, and second through follow-up observations;
4. A summary/description for use with practical purposes, and/or application was written; and
5. Credibility (i.e. reported biases and limitations) and value of results were documented (Flanagan, 1954) and commented on as needed in the interviews.

The intention of providing a list of critical behaviors was to engender a more objective and less subjective process with regard to the inferences related to teachers' proficiency and motivation with their actions. A practical application of the results was made during follow-up, individual interviews with teachers, during rounds II and III. For example, a prompted question was that of, "I noticed in your observation you did ..., can you tell me more about this?" This contributive approach established credibility toward identifying elements in practice that facilitated or hindered the role of alternative assessment as an intervention with student learning.

Professional learning communities. Social studies teachers are highly encouraged in the district to engage in grade level, professional learning community (PLC) sessions for the sake of discussing student achievement through data-informed decision-making processes (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006). In this space, colleagues collaborate to analyze student data and discuss instructional interventions toward the proficiency of 21st century content and skill sets (Abbott & Wren, 2016). During two separate sessions I served as an observer of PLC sessions

during which teachers were engaged in scoring students' performance tasks and calibrating scored student samples. I was fortunate to have gained first-hand knowledge on the scoring processes teachers used, based on their professional development training, and view their data-informed decision-making protocols for instructional planning.

Features of the physical settings, as well as the affective nature of the learning environment, were well-documented throughout my field experiences. According to Patton (2002), the patterns and frequencies of the communication and interactions among individuals could be illuminative and salient to the study. Therefore, as a follow-up measure, I searched for variations in the settings (i.e., 6th and 7th grade) to juxtapose teachers' protocols and procedures during the alternative assessment scoring process. Documented key phrases, questions, actions and mannerisms expressed by participants brought elaboration and rich detail to the findings.

Documents and Artifacts

Document analysis is a non-obtrusive means of analysis that provides insight as a communication device to corroborate findings from other data collection points (Yin, 2014). There was a place and function for documents in this qualitative research, mainly as they were examined for understanding empirical knowledge and experience (Bowen, 2009; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Specifically, using documents/artifacts as a data source was an appropriate method to elicit a more comprehensive understanding of the teaching and learning practices related to preparing students for alternative assessment. Information-rich sources of data, such as educational plans, academic documents, and instructional artifacts, supplement data I obtained through field experiences and rounds of interviews. An array of collected samples is featured in Table 3.4, representing the three educational environments of the theoretical framework.

Table 3.4 Documents and Artifacts Collected from the Educational Environments

Educational Environment	Documents and Artifacts
State Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • communication records (e.g., memos)
District Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • alternative assessments & criterion rubrics • professional development training workshop materials
Classroom Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pictures of the learning environment • Samples of student work • Instructional tasks • Formative and summative tasks & assessments

Description and reflection of these collected documents and artifacts are further detailed in Chapter IV, to which I expand upon their significance within the three educational environments/levels featured in the theoretical framework. Specifically, I capitalize on how these collections brought greater meaning and understanding to the phenomenon and research question.

Professional development workshops. Select district personnel from the case, to include the Secondary Social Studies Coordinator in this study, facilitated mandatory professional development sessions during the months of June through early September in 2015. Professional development support for sixth and seventh grade social studies teachers was provided with the main purpose of educating the audience on the 2014 legislative mandates. Intentions were made to introduce participants to the design, development, and implementation processes of performance-based assessments (PBAs). Modeling and evaluation of high-quality PBAs and historical thinking skills and processes were highly significant to the training session. Moreover, trainers capitalized on the opportunity to introduce participants to the alternative assessments generated by the district, with their accompanying rubrics. The sharing of expectations for teacher scoring and accountability served as the culminating portion of the training. Based on my artifact analysis of the division's training documents, a more detailed description of the professional development training session is provided in Chapter IV.

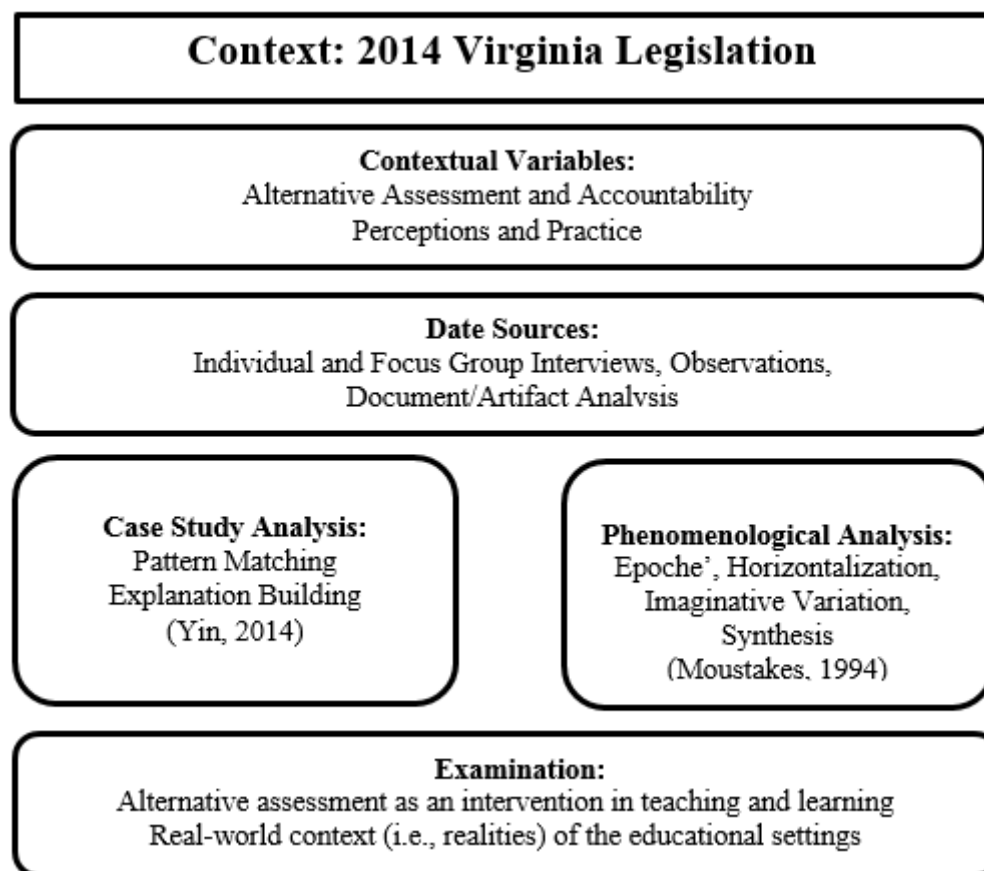
Data Analysis

According to Merriam (2009), data collection and analysis in qualitative studies are intended to be interactive processes, as well as “recursive” and “dynamic.” Therefore, in this study data were simultaneously analyzed while collected, allowing the analytic process to become more intensive over time. More broadly, meaning in this research was derived from data by using forms of data analysis to make sense of the case.

Transitioning from the district-level actions (i.e., exosystem) toward the conventions of teaching and learning in the classroom (i.e., macrosystem) is where the analyses of case study and phenomenology converged and worked complimentary. The methodology framework in Figure 3.1 depicts how the two analyses served to be complimentary to one another throughout this study; however, there was an ebb and flow among and between the methods. For instance, as the focus shifted away from *the case* and specifically toward teachers’ enactment of alternative assessments in practice, a phenomenological approach moved to the forefront. Specifically, I relied on phenomenological analysis for the discovery of individual and shared meaning based on the lived experiences of multiple participants within the case.

In this research, the case study protocol was mainly relied upon throughout the coding of observations and documents/artifacts to obtain a comprehensive description of *the case*, serving as the main source for contextual support of the interviews. This was most beneficial as the case was “bounded,” allowing for focused attention on the artifacts and actions unique to the subset of district representatives (Yin, 2014). At the same time, phenomenological analysis was predominantly used to code the realities of participants’ lived experiences related to the phenomenon, mainly through primary and secondary interviews. Although I discuss these forms of analysis separately, they worked in concert through a rich, descriptive protocol to capture the

Figure 3.1 Methodology Framework: Phenomenology and Case Study Analyses



eventual themes. These themes developed from the collective understandings that emerged from interviews with teachers and district leaders, illuminated by the analysis of classroom artifacts and district documents (e.g., graphic organizers, strategic plans) and anecdotal notes taken during classroom observations.

Descriptive Coding Protocol: An Overview

Also referred to as “topic coding,” descriptive coding uses words and phrases to summarize passages of text (i.e., data) (Saldana, 2013). To delineate, Saldana posits descriptive codes should refer to the topic, or “what is written,” while the content becomes the message. This general method of coding was appropriate for my qualitative work, particularly as this research drew from a variety of data points (i.e., interview transcripts, documents, field notes,

and artifacts). Questions such as, “What do I see happening here?” and “What is ____ all about?” were used as a guide while laying the foundation of the analysis to generate basic topics (i.e., codes). Additionally, descriptive coding of field notes aided my ability to document and illustrate “the tangible products that participants create, handle, work with, and experience on a daily basis” (p. 90). The generated topics/codes then led to a categorized inventory used to assist me in the future rounds, or cycles of coding, gaining a sense of organization with the study. For example, I used electronic Microsoft Word documents for color-coding and memo-keeping to turn raw data into categories during the reduction and transformation phases. Various organizers and matrices were used to capture categories with supporting evidence (Miles et al., 2014). An initial codebook was generated after the first interviews to hold first round findings, possible categories, and supporting evidence from the field. Various iterations of the codebooks were generated throughout the convergence of findings during the second round of coding to eventually create one final codebook consisting of three themes, or findings. To demonstrate how these descriptive findings were developed, utilizing forms of data analysis to better understand the case, I provide representative samples, each in turn, within the subsequent sections.

Case Study Analysis

The propositions (issues) identified in the Educational Environments Theoretical Framework served as an initial guide in organizing the analysis of data from the exosystem (district) level, but mainly the microsystem (classroom) level. Initial coding began by rationalizing the ways in which codes and concepts reflected *the meaning* of the retrieved words and phrases, and explain “how” and “why” (Yin, 2014). To structure the findings, a descriptive

framework was used to capture emerging categories and supporting evidence as they related to the domains of the case (Miles et. al., 2014) (see Figure 3.3).

Analytic processing began with the search across documents/artifacts and classroom observations for promising patterns and concepts among the academic tasks, content, discourse, and skill sets. Specifically, I relied on two analytic approaches based on the work of Yin (2014), which were used to filter and organize the data. First, *pattern matching* was used to compare the empirical findings, or other alternative predictions, to the patterns that emerged from the following:

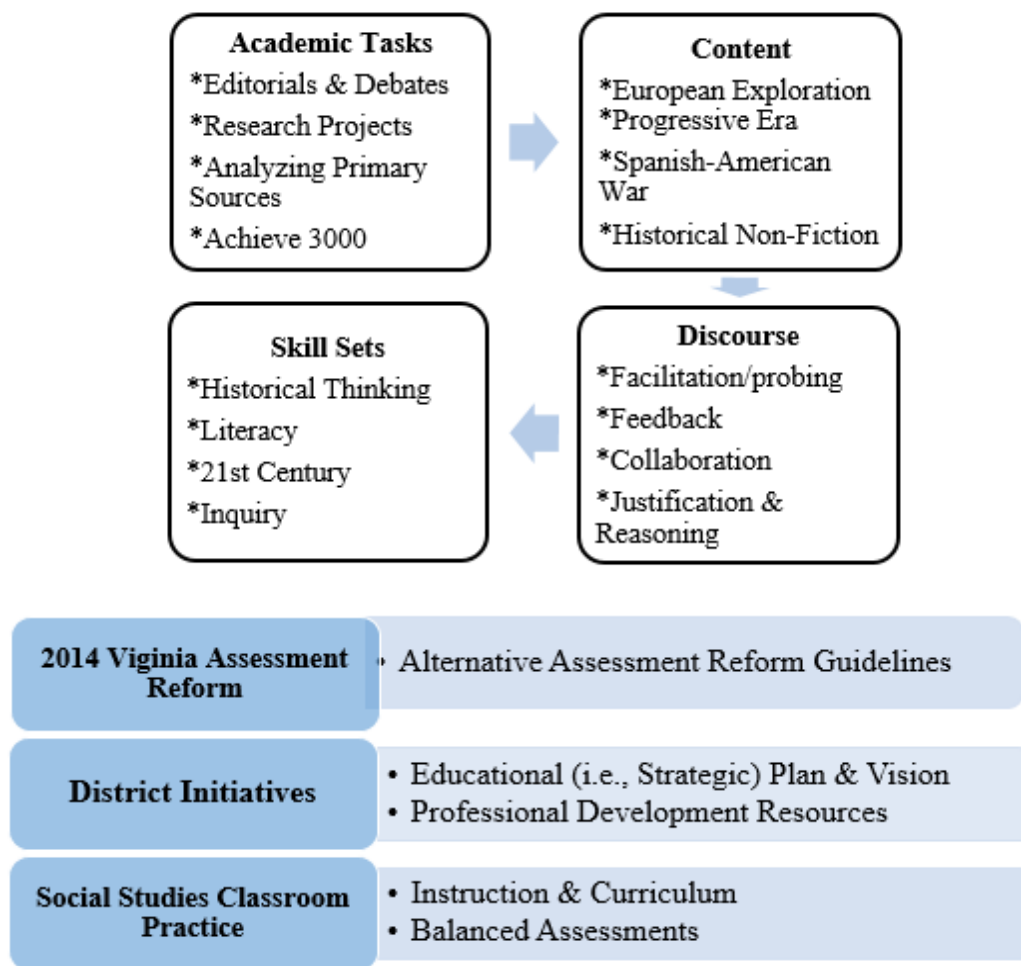
- The academic tasks (independent and/or collaborative work, active-learning);
- The content of the tasks (rigor, relevance, inquiry, interdisciplinary);
- The discourse among teacher(s) and student(s) (who is responsible for the action); and
- The skills sets (representative within the discipline of social studies and relevant to the 21st century learner).

The organization of these findings stemmed from the literature base and my knowledge of previously established theories. Secondly, this search aided in a better understanding of the domains of the Virginia legislative reform, Landstone district initiatives, and social studies practice through *explanation building*. This process allowed for further elaboration of “why” or “how” something happened with regard to the research purpose, and to justify the decisions made and actions taken to meet expectations of the reform. Inquiry prompted my search for supporting evidence of preparation and implementation of the alternative assessment reform:

- What were the learning targets or intended outcomes (i.e., product)?
- What skills did students engage in throughout (i.e., process)?
- What were the roles of the teacher/student (constructivist versus traditional learning)?

- In what ways was assessment used to gauge student proficiency of content and skills?

Figure 3.3 Case Study Descriptive Framework



As a representative example of this analysis, I first analyzed 7th grade classroom observation data for “patterns,” specifically for evidence of alternative-based, constructivist practice (i.e., tasks, content, discourse, skills) as they played a role in a formative assessment system. Next, “explanations” were built based on how the teachers’ actions best supported student learning in light of the reform (i.e., teacher and student roles). Samplings from this analysis from various 7th grade classroom observations are provided in Table 3.5 below. The

Table 3.5 Case Study Analysis Sample: Seventh Grade Observation Data

Grade 7 Content:	Grade 7 Tasks:
<p>Learning Target(s): Explain the social, political, and economic factors of the Spanish-American and the Philippine-American Wars.</p>	<p>Jill-Stanford History Group lesson: Students engaged in active learning while analyzing primary source documents on the topic of the Philippine-American War. Students collaborated and communicated in small groups as they engaged in active learning -- interpreting political cartoons based on the circumstances of war (contextualization). The final product was a graphic organizer with justified interpretations of the cartoons (corroboration). Teacher facilitated through monitoring and probing. *Formative & Constructive Practices Observed</p>
<p>Learning Target(s): Describe the social, political, and economic factors of the late 1800s/Early 1900s in the United States.</p> <p>Identify the progressives and their contributions during this era in history (at the turn of the century).</p>	<p>Jill, Morgan, & Bob: Seventh grade students conducted collaborative research in small groups on a progressive figure from the early 1900s. <u>Jill's classroom-</u> active learning in creating an electronic "Padlet" board on an iPad to share their research findings, in addition to a three-dimensional triaroma depicting the progressive figure in action. Displayed for a "virtual museum," rotational session to teach one other about an array of progressive figures. <u>Jill's and Bob's classrooms-</u> Collaborative research, active learning occurred through collaborative research, a short narrative to explain their findings. Displaying the three-dimensional triaromas and narratives around the room allowed students to teach one another about their figures during a "gallery walk" session. All teachers facilitated through monitoring and probing. *Formative & Constructive Practices Observed</p>
	<p>Morgan- Task: Achieve 3000 lesson; students worked independently in the software system on a leveled reading assignment based on readiness (i.e., Lexile score). Based on the topic of the Panama Canal, students responded to a series of response questions (i.e., multiple choice and open-response). *Formative & Constructive Practices Observed</p> <p>Morgan-Cause and Effect Mosaic (creativity) to which students needed to demonstrate understanding of seven, Philippine-American War events through pictures. Each was to be clearly labeled as a "cause" or an "effect." *Formative Practices Observed</p>
	<p>Bob-Explore social, political, and economic/industrial concerns regarding the Progressive Reform era. Students collaborated with a partner to work through a series of primary sources (i.e., pictures, newspaper clippings, political cartoons) and interpret the problems displayed. They then wrote a national editorial about one of the problems facing America at the turn of the century and provided possible solutions. Teacher facilitated through monitoring and probing. *Formative & Constructive Practices Observed</p>

Skill Sets (Process)	<p><u>21st Century Skill Sets</u>- critical thinking, problem-solving, effective communication (verbal and written), persuasive writing, forming an argument-rationalization, technological literacy</p> <p><u>Literacy</u>- Reading comprehension, Cornell note-taking, dialogue and collaboration, research skills</p> <p><u>Historical literacy</u>- cause and effect, interpreting charts and graphs, analysis, critical thinking, geographic mapping, interpreting/analyzing, primary source documents, corroboration, contextualization, sourcing</p>
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patterns that emerged through the content (i.e., content standards and skills sets) informed the explanations of the tasks and their significance to alternative assessment. Together, they were used to support the main findings/themes later discussed in Chapter V that discuss in detail: the assessment reform as a new accountability assessment system, the district's initiatives through supportive interventions, and social studies teachers' practices in the midst of the reform.

In general, throughout the process of analyzing data from the ground up, categories emerged as significant aspects of the case study (Yin, 2014). Prior knowledge and analysis resulting from the previous study (Abbott, 2015) aided in the interpretations of their significance to the case. In order to obtain the highest quality of analysis, all evidence was considered for full, exhaustive coverage of the research question.

Phenomenological Analysis

From a philosophical standpoint, the tradition of phenomenology has varied approaches centered on the role of intentionality. Notably, "the idea of intentionality in phenomenology does not refer to our [researchers'] intent, purpose, reason or motivation for doing something... [r]ather, it means the ways in which we find ourselves being in relation to the world through our day-to-day living" (Vagle, 2010, p. 394). Essentially, the epistemologies of the tradition can be traced back to Husserl's (1982) "transcendental" approach in the mid-late 20th century. Husserl believed in the researcher's movement toward "the thing" (i.e., phenomenon) itself, between the

boundaries of realism and idealism, in order to gain full advantage of the lived experience.

Similarly, through a more contemporary lens Dahlberg et al. (2008) explain phenomenological methods in the context of “lifeworld research” that draw from the ideals of placement, or being in the world – what the world is and what it means to humans. The ideas presented by Husserl and Dahlberg et al. initiated my decision to use phenomenological analysis as an appropriate means to best comprehend the everyday occurrences of my participants faced with the 2014 legislative reform. What better way to satisfy the need for knowing and understanding than through human interaction.

As an extension of these ideas, Vagle (2009, 2010) generated a “post-intentional” research method to best address a phenomenon. One specific aspect of Vagle’s approach that differs from Husserl’s is the concept of ‘bridling’ that stems from the more contemporary views of lifeworld research. Through a constructivist lens, bridling addresses *meaning* through the formation of relationships among participants, the researcher’s interpretations/findings, and his or her bridled attempts. Consequently, meaning and openness can become limited through Husserl’s notion of “bracketing,” therefore, limiting the ability to address constructivism.

For the purposes of this study, I chose to primarily follow the transcendental (descriptive) approach acknowledged by Husserl (1982), through the analysis phases of epoche`, horizontalization, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings. Husserl’s philosophies have served as the roots of phenomenology from which others’ visions have grown and was the first to include hints of lifeworld conceptions. However, I found one element of Husserl’s approach, bracketing, to be an unnatural fit for the study. I would be remiss if I did not fully disclose how closely I am tied to the seminal topics of this study – alternative assessment, formative assessment, and performance-based assessment. Under these circumstances, I questioned how I

could possibly cast aside my pre-understandings and epistemic beliefs through bracketing, while viewing the phenomenon through fresh eyes. When one engages in bracketing, an element of restraint is required which may place limitations on overall meaning, understanding, and research openness (Dahlberg et al., 2008; Vagle, 2009, 2010). It was for these reasons that the act of bridling, in lieu of bracketing, appeared more appropriate within my phenomenological analysis. Through bridling my intentions continuously “interrogated” the implementation process of alternative assessments through consciousness and inquiry; meanwhile, keeping my background and prior experiences under control.

Based on participants’ lived experiences, the analysis of interview data through a phenomenological approach required first, movement from the words found in significant statements, then the formation of broader units of meaning to capture the essence of ‘what’ and ‘how’ pertaining to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Specific steps germane to phenomenology were used to display raw data and facilitate the processes of generating categories and themes.

Transcendental phenomenological analysis. In this study, the phenomenon of the district’s design and implementation of alternative assessment served as the common ground from which all participants shared their voices and behaviors with regard to making the adaption to performance-based assessment. The depth and complexity of their experiences during the change from preparing students for a multiple-choice based approach, then shifting toward a performance-based approach, was carefully described to capture a holistic richness versus a mere explanation (Moustakas, 1994). No two perceptions were exactly the same, and I was challenged by the process of discovering transferable experiences among participants under similar circumstances. To that end, I engaged in various systematic phases using Moustakas’s

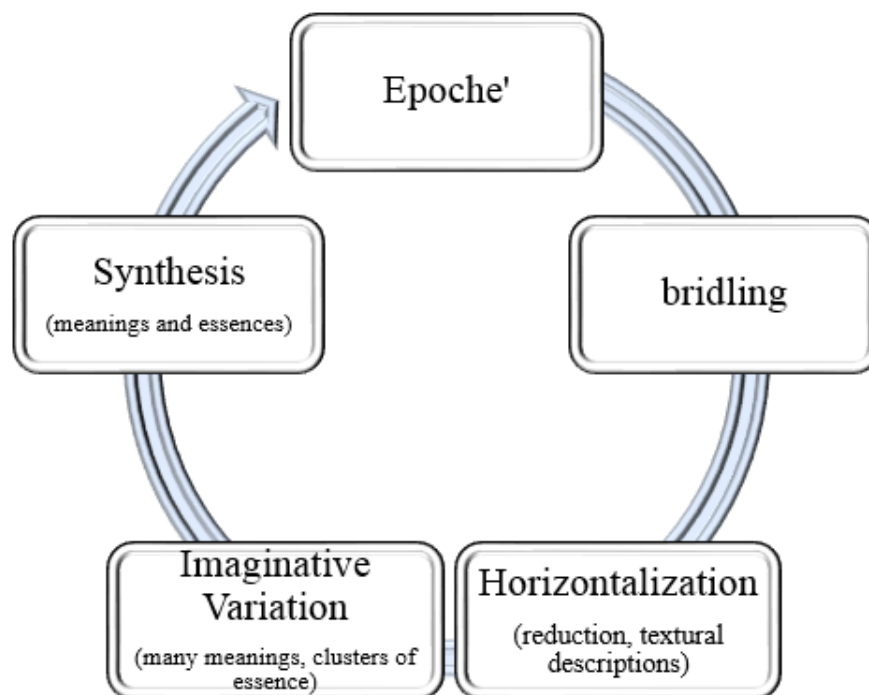
framework to capture the essence of participants' experiences in implementing the alternative assessments, which I briefly introduce below and further outline in detail within the subsequent sections:

- *Epoche`* - the process of coming to know; seeing things as they appear through an open mind;
- Horizontalization- the initial identification of participants' relevant statements to the phenomenon of interest;
 - Reduction and Elimination- the process of uncovering meaning units and discarding vague or insufficient statements to later categorize;
 - Cluster- the process of identifying similar meaning units;
 - Textural Descriptions- the process of combining participants' voices/experiences into meaning units, or categorizing;
- Imaginative Variation- recognizing the many meaning units from various experiences and the process of bringing together multiple clusters to create a composite description of participants' experiences;
 - Structural Descriptions, or Clusters of Essences- the process of providing context to the textural descriptions by offering details regarding the conditions that affected the experiences;
- Synthesis- the presentation of unified views that captures the overall essences and universal meanings of the experiences (see Figure 3.4).

Epoche`. Within phenomenology is the belief of *intentionality of consciousness* to which reality is divided into the nature of “subjects and objects as they appear in consciousness” (Creswell, 2013, p. 77). In the context of the phenomenon of the 2014 legislature, the alternative

assessments served as the “objects”, to which participants (i.e., subjects) had personal, subjective views outside of shared, objective views. Husserl, the father of phenomenology as a philosophical movement, posits that at the core of the methodology is “the freedom of suppositions” or epoche’, “a Greek word meaning to stay away from or abstain” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). In simpler terms, this approach can be thought of as adherence to full transparency through purified thoughts.

Figure 3.4 Phenomenological Analysis Cycle



(Adapted from Moustakas, 1994)

In a quest to establish new knowledge, Moustakas (1994) reflects personally on the engagement of epoche’ as “a process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness” (p. 85). Historically, he references Husserl’s concept of epoche’ as a way a way of coming to know, and to view phenomenon with a new set of eyes, both of which requires a manner in which “everything is

perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (p. 34). The greater challenge with engaging in epoche` is the next phase of tabling out, or “bracketing” all that is conscious. The researcher must feel comfortable with entering a naïve state to accept the phenomenon simply ‘as is’ in a compelling new form. I found this engagement unnatural as a result of my close relationship with alternative assessment throughout my career. Therefore, I chose to supplant bracketing for a process that keeps my inquiry regarding the phenomenon at the forefront of the study – bridling.

Bridling versus bracketing. What signifies reflective lifeworld research “is the discourse on how researchers, as residents of the lifeworld, influence or constitute their research results” (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p. 19). Moustakas’ (1994) views on bracketing call for actions of setting aside personal experiences regarding the phenomenon, causing the participants’ experiences to serve as the main focus without outside interference. Therefore, it is believed that in order to fully understand participants’ experiences with the phenomenon, the researcher must bracket his/her own understandings and beliefs. According to Vagle (2009), a phenomenologist has intentionally established an ever-present relationship with the phenomenon under investigation; since there is no escape one can only try to find sense and meaning through ongoing reflection—bridling. The term was derived from an attempt to describe the sensitivity and open attitude toward the phenomenon and its meaning, to which there becomes “disciplined interaction” and “embodied dialogue between two entities” (e.g., researcher and participant) (Dahlberg et al., p. 129). Bridling becomes a “reflexive project” to which prior and developed understandings of the phenomenon are consistently revisited, with a central focus on the constant motion of intentionality (Vagle, 2009, 2010).

The parting from bracketing to bridling is perceived as a conscious attempt to pursue validity in phenomenological research (Dahlberg et al., 2008; Vagle 2009). Dahlberg et al. further detail the process of bridling with the following words:

While ‘bracketing’ is directed backwards, putting all energy in to fighting pre-understanding and keeping it in check ‘back there’, not letting it affect what is happening ‘here and now’, ‘bridling’ has a more positive tone to it as it aims to direct the energy into the open and respectful attitude that allows the phenomenon to present itself. (p. 130)

For several months of data collection, I had not yet come into contact with the phenomenon. Throughout, I remained patient as a hunter of meaning, bridling my inquiry as a display of great anticipation. Once I eventually came into contact with the phenomenon in the field, I remained disciplined during my interactions with an open and alert attitude. While bridling my understandings of such encounters I was cautious not to make quick or definite claims of anything that could be perceived as indefinite.

Throughout the study, the bridling journal provided a space for me to step aside from the data collection processes and truly search within myself for personal meaning in the present. I capitalized on the opportunities to reflect on my encounters with participants and their practice, but mainly used the time to frame my questions of what still remained undiscovered. Without reservation, I openly disclosed my past experiences, perceptions, inquiries, anticipations, disbeliefs, and amazements. My bridling entries were composed at a number of locations, such as coffee shops, the park, and in the car outside of the schools before and after exiting the field. For example, the initial encounters with my participants caused me to question and reflect on their diversity, stating: “As I recognize the span of ages and experience among my participants, I

can't help but wonder what these factors might say with regard to their epistemic belief systems" (bridling journal entry, 11-05-15). In a similar mindset the following week, I elaborated through my related recognitions:

Each participant has a story. Which leads me to the question of, "How will I tell that story, and paint a true representation of how each individual has experienced the phenomenon?" As they are faced with the phenomenon in their daily practice, how often does it become a factor in their sequencing of instruction? (bridling journal entry, 11-14-15)

Later in the study, upon observing the alternative assessments administered with students for the first time, I couldn't help but engage in the following inquiry:

As an observer, I wonder what the learning environment will look like, sound like, and feel like? What will be the tone of the teachers prior to administering the assessment, and how will this be set? In what ways will the students react to the assessment, based upon observation (i.e., engagement, motivation)? In what format will the alternative assessment be administered, since there is a great deal of flexibility? (bridling journal entry, 12-07-15)

These sample insights added to the cohesive understandings (i.e., themes) conveyed through my later findings that developed as a result of this work. I found the format of electronic journaling to be most convenience, mainly for time and security purposes, and ease of access upon future reference. Additional excerpts from my journal entries are shared in Chapter V to illuminate and bring greater understanding to the complexities of the findings.

Horizonalization. One particular facet of horizonalization is the possibility to discover new information without limits; therefore, constant replacement persists (Moustakas, 1994). I

engaged in this discovery by locating significant moments and situations within my data that depicted the true realities of how participants experienced the phenomenon. Mainly, the horizontalization process was twofold. First, I generated textural descriptions through the complex step of data reduction – the examination of specific instances (i.e., quotes) featuring participants’ perceptions and experiences in practice, and the elimination of abstract or irrelevant data. Next, clusters were identified to provide context with participants’ conditions, related to their perceptions of the reform and their classroom practice. I now further describe these essential steps, each in turn, as they relate to the ultimate establishment of findings in this study. These processes are further detailed in the subsequent sections and Table 3.5.

Phenomenological reduction and clustering. During the process of coming to know the phenomenon, the actions of “phenomenological reduction” required the iterative process of looking and describing to compose textural descriptions. Such actions were derived from the notion that everything has meaning and “each angle of perception adds something to one’s knowing of the horizons of a phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 91). The purpose of this step in data reduction was to highlight within the transcripts what was most meaningful, attending to what was truly present as descriptors of participants’ involvement with the phenomenon. After identifying the textural descriptions during my initial round of coding, I used color-coding during my second round to denote the textural descriptions, which aided in transfer for clustering and imaginative variation, or categorizing. In the following transcript excerpt and Table 3.6, I feature this process based on an interview with a single participant:

Interview Question (ALA): *Can you describe the differences between your experiences with an end-of-year SOL test in comparison to now, with no SOL test but instead intermittent, performance-based assessments?*

Steve: *I think really the big difference is the pressure, and it really opens up to being more creative with technology. Yah, I guess we'll just leave it at technology and what can be done with that. But that being said, I taught 13 years with an SOL and I was still doing the same things and the scores were there. So my point being is, if you're teaching the content, and you're covering that content well and they're actually getting it because you do fun, creative performance tasks, they can actually end up doing better. But then again, you always saved those last few weeks to kind of "teach to the test" as much as you can, you'd be foolish not to because obviously you're going to be judged by that singular test, or 50 questions, that comes at the end of the year. And that's unfortunate, but it's what we lived in. So going back to my original point though, I think it relieves a little pressure and frees up some for creativity in terms of, "all right, if I didn't cover that one tiny objective, fully, I can certainly cover it in another way" and hope in the end that It's going to be OK.*

Table 3.6 Single Participant: Initial Codes and Categories

Horizontalization – Phenomenological Reduction (i.e., Initial Codes)	Imaginative Variation/Clusters of Essences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think really the big difference is the pressure, and it really opens up to being more creative with technology. • It frees up some for creativity in terms of, "all right, if I didn't cover that one tiny objective, fully, I can certainly cover it in another way" 	Strengths/Positives of the Reform
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I taught 13 years with an SOL and I was still doing the same things and the scores were there. • If you're teaching the content, and you're covering that content well and they're actually getting it because you do fun, creative performance tasks, they can actually end up doing better. 	Epistemic Beliefs/Philosophy of Teaching and Learning

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You always save those last few weeks to kind of “teach to the test” as much as you can, you’d be foolish not to because obviously you’re going to be judged by that singular test, or 50 questions, that comes at the end of the year. 	SOL Test Experiences
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The process of generating the textural descriptions was dependent upon my “competent and clear reflectiveness on an ability to attend, recognize, and describe with clarity” (p. 93).

Imaginative variation and clusters of essences. The subsequent step in conducting phenomenological analysis was imaginative variation, or the establishment of broader frames of reference with respect to diverse positions and roles associated with the phenomenon. I composed structural descriptions as context to highlight the situational circumstances that underlie the textural meanings, such as with considerations for causality and conditions relation to self, others, and setting (Moustakas, 1994). Critical to this phase was capturing the essences, or combined underlying variables, by analyzing participants’ divergent perspectives of “how” and “what” these essential structures were like. This step required consideration of the initial codes from multiple, or all participants (i.e., leaders and teachers), that were similar in nature with respect to different factors, and then combined to create overarching clusters of essences (i.e., categories). This is demonstrated within the Table 3.7 below, featuring the analytic flow from horizontalization to imaginative variation.

The next step of analysis, synthesis of meanings and essences, required the establishment of themes that derived from the textural and structural descriptions, composed of two critical steps that became most purposeful: (1) describing the contexts that undergirded the phenomenon’s development, and (2) a consideration of time, space, and causality, or the

“universal structures,” that engendered participants’ perceptions and actions in practice with respect to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Table 3.7 Multiple Participants: Initial Codes and Categories

Horizontalization – (Sample Codes)	Imaginative Variation/Clusters of Essences – (Sample Categories)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For me it [the reform] has been freeing (Jill). • I think there’s less pressure and I can be more creative in my planning (Steve). • I think I’m a better teacher because the stress isn’t so much on me (Lisa). 	Strengths/Positives of the Reform
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It’s not always quantifiable and not as easy, or in black and white (Steve). • It’s still difficult to convince the students that this is really important when it’s not an SOL score (Bob). • I’m teaching them how to analyze, how to describe, and how to identify. Those are skills sets that serve them well (Deedra). 	Alternative Assessments in Practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There’s an element of added accountability, even though it may seem like there’s less accountability formally, for teachers to really work kids through mastery (Dr. Jones). • We’re seeing their work throughout the year so we can hopefully see growth, and if they’re not growing we can put them on the right path (Morgan). 	Accountability

Synthesis – meanings and essences. Moustakas (1994) acknowledged the last step as *synthesis of the meanings and essences*, to which textual and structural descriptions assimilated into essential statements and descriptions to highlight the phenomenon in its entirety. In this culminating step of analysis, meanings become the properties that created “guiding directions” toward knowledge of the phenomenon, or participants’ responses to the reform. Moreover, I integrated the *essences* which were presented as a synthesis of meanings, shared from my vantage point, to complete the full analysis for each theme. It should be noted that the meanings

and essences of any phenomenon are never absolute or fully “exhausted”, as they are entirely dependent upon time, place, circumstance, and ultimately my interpretation (through the study of the phenomenon). In Table 3.8 below I highlight this final phase that includes the transformation from clusters of essences to a synthesis of meaning and essences. In other words, categories similar in nature were collapsed to form three main findings. There was transfer of categories across multiple themes, such as the categories of “Accountability” and “Perceptions of Alternative Assessment.”

Table 3.8 Transforming Categories into Themes

Imaginative Variation – Clusters of Essences (i.e., categories)	Synthesis – Meaning and Essences (i.e., themes)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SOL Learning Environment • Accountability • Epistemic Beliefs/T&L Practice • Perceptions of Alternative Assessments • Formative & Summative Assessment • Test-Taking Generation 	A New Beginning: Initial Perceptions and Practices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengths/Challenges Associated with the Reform • Perceptions of Alternative Assessments • Communication and Collaboration • Professional Development • Collecting & Analyzing Student Data • Accountability 	Establishing Common Ground through Support: Teachers as Participants
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alternative Assessment in Practice • Epistemic Beliefs/T&L Practice • Accountability • Communication and Collaboration • Thinking Skills and Processes • Formative Assessment • Differentiation 	Bridging Epistemologies and Practice in Light of Reform

Previously aforementioned, I described how at times the analyses worked independently through discrete processes, such as when looking at the accountability of alternative assessment through a case study protocol, and the perceptions of alternative assessment through a phenomenological approach. During other instances, the analyses worked harmoniously through shared data sources (i.e., interviews, observations, document/artifact analysis) and examination methods of the findings bound within real-world contexts. Ultimately, the framework demonstrated a strategic flow between the methods to capture full coverage and rich description of the phenomenon and research question.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is a valuable process of maximizing validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For the purposes of this study, I focused on the following criteria: (a) credibility; (b) transferability; (c) authenticity; and (d) substantive validation, to which various strategies of trustworthiness were used to address these criteria. These strategies are described below as they relate to the context of methodology in conducting qualitative research.

Thick Description

Through the provisions of thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meaning of interacting individuals in the case were heard (Merriam, 2009). More broadly, Patton (2002) posits “description provides the skeletal frame for analysis that leads into interpretation” with a strategic balance struck between the two (p. 503). In this study, thick, rich description of findings provided the foundation for qualitative analysis, paving the path for the reader to enter the settings of central office and the social studies classrooms to gain a clearer vision of the phenomenon. Structuring my interpretations involved deep explanations of the findings, mainly through answering “why” questions, followed by the significance of their results. My

framework of thick description featured beyond the recordings of mere facts, participants' actions, and face-value appearances. Instead, it became a web of details relating the context of alternative assessments with threads connecting participants within *the case* and their expressed voices and feelings regarding the phenomenon.

Peer Debriefing

To obtain validity and rigor within the research process I consulted with two peer debriefers periodically during the phases of data collection and analysis (Patton, 2002). The collaborative dialogue between myself and debriefers was valued for the opportunity to reflect in a manner that suggested alternative interpretations of analysis, and to better understand how influences of my roles and experiences strengthened credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The selection of two peer debriefers was based on their knowledge and experience with alternative assessment approaches and theories of student-centered practice.

Peer debriefers 1 and 2. As outsiders of the division, both debriefers brought an unbiased perspective into the debriefing process. Peer debriefer 1 had six total years of experience as an elementary school teacher and Reading Specialist in grades K-5, and 11 total years working at the Community College level as a Developmental Reading and Writing instructor and Faculty Development Coordinator. Her experiences with alternative assessments in K-12 were limited; however, she has employed problem and project-based learning applications within her higher education level courses. Peer debriefer 2 had 10 years of experience working in social studies and humanities with grades 7 through 13 in the United Kingdom and eight total years of experience teaching social studies in grades 6 through 10, and grade 12 in the United States. Throughout his graduate studies he has spent years studying inquiry-based teaching methods with pre-service social studies teachers.

Specifically, I relied on Peer debriefer 1 for her critical eye during the general confirmation of coding, based on her high interest in disciplinary literacy. She questioned possible codes collapsing into categories to establish a firm grounding moving forward in the analysis process. Peer debriefer 2 specifically offered an analytical perspective based on his extensive background in the field of social studies. Throughout the second round of interviews he aided in the confirmation of categories and possible themes in the establishment of a codebook. During the peer debriefing process, both asked questions such as “How does this relate to...?” and “Why might this be important?” to aid in the focus of attaining the goals outlined by the research question (Spillett, 2003).

Member Checking

Member checking was used as a key strategy to establish trustworthiness by asking members to validate my interpretations of the typed transcripts from the audio-recorded interviews (Miles et al., 2014). After exiting the field, transcripts were sent to all participants, through electronic means, to ensure accuracy and full transparency of the conversation. Participants were offered the opportunity to refine their statements and/or provide additional clarification and understandings. I perceived this to be a new experience for the participants based on their comments throughout, such as “It’s cool to see my words in writing” and “I didn’t realize how much I repeat myself.” The member checking response rate from individual interviews resulted in 11 out of 12 replies, a 92% return. As for the focus group interviews, seven out of 9 participants responded, a 78% return rate. Understandably, a lower response rate from the district leaders may have resulted from the preoccupation with numerous tasks that accompany their district roles.

I felt the necessity to personally transcribe my own audio-recorded conversations in a timely manner to ensure a prompt delivery to participants. Within two days, transcripts were delivered to participants through email, while the conversations were still somewhat fresh in their minds. I perceived any further delay in this process to be counterproductive with regard to the fidelity of the member checking process.

Triangulation of Data Collection

Triangulation through the various modalities of data collection methods (i.e., interviews, observations and documents/artifacts) was used to establish multiple angles and determine consistencies/inconsistencies of findings (Yin, 2014). Additionally, the convergence of data formats illuminated findings through greater context. For example, during the interviews and classroom observations, I documented teachers' references of artifacts (i.e., writing, photos, and hard copies) as the tools used to support the teaching and learning process in response to the reform. Analysis of the documents acquired from the district-level, such as copies of professional development training materials, instructional frameworks, and survey data, aided in the thick description of the district as *the case*. I drew from the artifact/document analyses findings to "match patterns" between the case and existing literature. These actions led to the identification of links that "built explanations" of the justified decisions and actions taken to meet the state's reform mandates. Additionally, I relied on multiple rounds of individual and focus group interviews to capture the nature of lived experiences and the how the reform had impacted educational practice at the exosystem (district) and microsystem (classroom) levels.

Audit Trail

The search for achieving credibility in qualitative research will draw upon various validation techniques, such as that of maintaining an audit trail (Olesen, 2005). In this study, my

audit trail served as a physical, comprehensive record of all data collection actions (i.e., pre, during, and post) and analysis procedures associated with case study and phenomenology. Well-organized and labeled three-ring binders were used to sub-divide the various phases of the study for consumers' review. The beginning section included items such as IRB exemption papers, the district approval application and approval letter, and a concept map to generate the research question. Documented communications with gatekeepers/key informants, administrators, and participants (i.e., member-checking), was also included. Next, records of district and school-related documents (i.e., strategic plan and demographic data) were kept together for analysis purposes, mainly to provide context in Chapter IV. This was followed by distinct sections featuring each participant with his or her informed consent and demographic sheet. The manner in which I met with each participant was featured: Interview 1, Observation 1, Interview 2, and Observation 2. The interview sections were chronologically ordered to capture the phases of data-analysis, moving from the typed transcript to the phases of color-coding initial codes and combining codes into categories. Observation sections featured completed Field Note Templates, followed by artifacts gathered from the instruction and/or pictures taken of the learning environment. Next, focus group interviews were kept separate from individual interviews and sequenced in the same fashion with data analysis, followed by my bridling journal. Lastly, multiple iterations of the evolving codebook were lead up to the final codebook, demonstrating the collapsing of categories into final themes. This served as the culminating phase of data analysis and final piece of the audit trail.

Limitations

There were limitations to this study in which certain aspects were out of my control. First, focus groups can be limited by various internal and external factors (Krueger, 1994).

Krueger recognizes the traditional protocol which calls for individual who do not know one another, as “familiarity tends to exhibit disclosure” (p. 18). However, Krueger also acknowledges how reality of such guidelines is sometimes difficult, or even impossible, for researchers. I solicited my participants from within their respective schools or administrative office; therefore, group members knew one another and had history together. As an internal factor, the group dynamics were not the same as they may have been among strangers lacking pre-established, affective relationships, which could be perceived as a benefit or drawback to the collection of data, and ultimately the findings. As an external factor, I was a well-known educator throughout the district after having served in various roles at the district level. In several instances the participants knew who I was based on my previous work associated with alternative assessment (i.e., performance tasks and problem-based learning). As a result, participants may have been tempted to engage in social desirability. Lastly, this study investigated a small group of Landstone district representatives, comprised of middle schools social studies teachers from two respective schools and district leaders from the Department of Teaching and Learning. Narrowing my scope of investigation excluded many other possible participants, across grades and subjects, also impacted by the reform.

Context and Settings

Although the phenomenon impacted a number of subjects in grades 3-7 in the Commonwealth of Virginia’s curriculum, this study was selective in its analysis of 6th and 7th grade social studies. Additionally, looking at the practices of select teachers in two district middle schools within the district represents a small sample of the larger population impacted by the reform. I rationalize these decisions by first placing great emphasis on the protocol for case study, to which quality versus quantity is at the forefront during this study’s data collection

timeline from October through December. Second, the phenomenological analysis called for capturing the lived experiences of participants engaged with the phenomenon in order to fully address the research question. A significant limitation in this research was time constraints, to which observation of only one alternative assessment administered during the first four months of the school year was observed (out of several assessments to be administered intermittently during the school year).

Lastly, the interview protocol for this study called for participants' perceptions of the old SOL system of assessment, as well comparisons of their practice within the old (SOL) and new (alternative) assessment systems. All data in this regard were self-reported from participants, based on the recollections of their lived experiences, rather than directly measured to validate these accounts.

Generalizability: Qualitative Research

Although qualitative methods are perceived as ideal for capturing deeper understandings and perspectives (i.e., persons, groups, events), such methods are typically accompanied by concerns of generalizing results to outside settings (Firestone, 1993). For purposes of generalization, I remained cautious of the "standards" of good practice throughout the research process. For example, I clearly established the phenomenon of interest at the forefront of the study, and devised a strategic, credible plan of action for data collection and analysis with thorough justification and reasoning.

My preparations to provide thick, rich description in my findings including a "broad range of background features, aspects of the processes studied, and outcomes so readers have enough information to assess the match between the situation studies and their own, especially since their situations might be quite different" (Firestone, 1993, p. 18). Specifically, I opened the

door to case-to-case translation – the most common argument made by qualitative researchers – which, according to Firestone, occurs whenever a program/idea from one setting is under consideration in another. When considering such action, the conditions of this case truly mattered; this was especially true when determining how to “increase the utility of the reported results...” (p. 17). To enhance applicability of findings in my research, I considered four criteria:

- 1) material facts (i.e., the fit between the alternative assessment implementation and the districts’ needs/readiness);
- 2) appropriateness (i.e., the fit for the district’s goals, value judgments);
- 3) reason for the decision (i.e., needs of the targeted group); and
- 4) generality of the decision (i.e., based on fundamental grounds...) (p. 18).

With regard to application in outside settings, Lincoln and Guba (1985) posit “the burden of proof for transferability lies less with the investigator than with the reader,...[t]he investigator’s responsibility ends with providing sufficient descriptive data to make such similarity judgments possible” (as cited in Firestone, 1993, p. 18). Therefore, it is incumbent upon the reader to assess claims with a critical eye, to which considerations might include whether the application is limited to a diverse setting. Moreover, a reader must make inferences regarding unexplored factors, such as uncharted areas or any non-disclosures in the findings.

Chapter Summary

In Chapter III, the theoretical framework of the educational environments (i.e., state, district local, and classroom) draws particular attention to the phenomenon of the 2014 legislation. The research question, “How does reform focused on alternative assessment influence: (a) teachers’ perceptions, and (b) educational practice?” served as the platform from

which the study was carried out through a blended analysis model. Case study (Yin, 2014) and phenomenological analyses (Moustakas, 1994, Vagle, 2009) were used to capture district stakeholders' accounts as they adapted to the state's policy reform. A triangulation of data collection points featured individual and focus group interviews with 6th/7th grade social studies teachers and district leaders, classroom and PLC observations, and document/artifact analysis of collected items from the district and classroom levels. Although follow-up interviews were conducted with district leaders present in the previous study (Abbott, 2015), emphasis remained on the impact of policy change in teachers' practice to capture perceptions of alternative assessment reform in relation to their practice. During the study, additional trustworthiness strategies were enacted to gain credibility, such as the use of peer debriefers, maintenance of an audit trail, member checking, and provisions of thick description through findings.

In Chapter IV I provide an in-depth analysis of the district to provide a broader context for the study, mainly as a means to outline the division's strategic goals and instructional plans. Document analysis findings from seminal district resources are revealed, followed by matrices and descriptions of the 6th/7th grade alternative assessments. The latter portion of the chapter features primary participants' biographies to provide greater insight into their backgrounds, teaching experiences, and roles and responsibilities in the district that shape their actions and beliefs in the classroom.

CHAPTER IV

CONTEXT

In this chapter I present an “analytic search” that unifies particular case settings and circumstances in an effort to maximize interpretations of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). More broadly, the workings of this chapter reside in the assumption that “the whole is understood as a complex system that is greater than the sum of its parts” (p. 59). By way of document/artifact analysis I present the interrelated “parts and wholes” to provide the context for *the case*, including participants, places, and conditions that are unique to the Landstone Public School District.

Rather than dissecting *the case* into discrete parts, this chapter is designed to view the relationships between participants and its greater context of the district. In detail, I have contextualized the role of alternative assessment reform within the educational environments of the state, district, and classroom to better understand how the learning environment has been shaped or effected by the legislation. Furthermore, the conditions and circumstances of significant events, occurring prior to and during data collection and analysis, are explored and described within the broader context of the alternative assessment reform. Each section is linked to The Educational Environments Theoretical Model, and broken down into specific topics that directly relate to my document analysis, and remain significant to the Superintendent’s Memo (VBOE, 2014) which outlines the state’s vision for the reform.

My intentions in this chapter are threefold. First, I define the origin of Landstone Public School’s initiatives to achieve the goals outlined in its educational vision, or strategic plan. This includes provisions of how the reform mandates aligned with contextual factors of the case through professional development and additional supportive resources for social studies teachers.

Next, I unpack the district-generated alternative assessments by teasing out patterns that emerged from the document analysis that aligned with literature on best practices in social studies.

Finally, I use the remainder of the chapter to present educational biographies of the six primary participants (Jill, Morgan, Bob, Steve, Deedra, and Lisa). These passages are predicated on teachers' epistemic belief systems and provide the background necessary to form a deeper understanding of the lived experiences detailed in Chapter V.

The State of Virginia – The Macrosystem

In this section I outline the political culture of the state of Virginia with regard to the 2014 legislation on assessment reform. For the past decade in particular, the educational climate of grades 3 through 12 has been driven by the accountability of standards and standardized assessments. As one of four states serving as a non-participant with the Common Core State Standards initiatives, Virginia relies on its curricular Standards of Learning (SOL) tests to gauge student proficiency of content knowledge and understanding. Similar to the CCSS, initiatives have been enacted through the Virginia Department of Education (2010a) to address society's demands for meeting the required expectations of jobs and postsecondary education. Specific ways in which Virginia set out to increase students' readiness were addressed through the College and Career Readiness Initiative to "ensure that college and career-ready learning standards in reading, writing and mathematics are taught in every Virginia high school classroom" and that students are prepared for college and the work force prior to leaving 12th grade (p. 1). Notably, the Virginia Board of Education (2010b) conducted a "side-by-side comparison" of Virginia's 2010 English Standards of Learning (SOLs) with the CCSS for English Language Arts and Literacy (ELAL) using the curriculum frameworks that support pedagogy in the Commonwealth. This organization was intended to demonstrate how "the

Curriculum Framework is essential to any comparison conducted between the CCSS for ELAL and the English SOL since it ‘unpacks’ the SOL, providing detail that complements the standards” (VDOE, 2010b, p. 3). In comparison, the point is made that both (the CCSS for ELAL and English SOLs) “are rigorous and provide a progression of expectations for student learning and understanding” in the English discipline. Although prior to graduation, students will have experience working with the same content, the “learning progressions” would be different and the CCSS will not have covered all content that the SOLs cover.

It was in 2014 the Virginia General Assembly legislation passed the House Bill 930/Senate Bill 306 to make specific changes with teaching and learning progressions, mainly in the area of social studies. Specifically, the rationale for the reform was shared in the guidelines released in the State Superintendent’s Memo:

In the past several years there has been increasing concern regarding the amount of testing in local school divisions and the time spent in test preparation activities. The intent of this legislation was to eliminate some of the tests used for accountability and to encourage the greater use of assessments that were designed to inform instruction. While the legislation does not mandate the type of local assessment that should be administered, the intent of these guidelines to encourage the use of assessments that may be used by teachers to improve their instruction (VDOE, 2014).

Virginia’s move toward an alternative assessment approach was to provide detailed feedback regarding what students have learned, in addition to gauging the concepts and skill sets students have yet to master. In the subsequent sections, I draw attention to the various stakeholders at the district and school levels that have become tasked with carrying out the state’s vision with the assessment reform.

The District: Landstone City Public Schools – The Exosystem

As the Landstone district leaders were responsible for enacting an action plan to carry out the reform, I provide a full understanding of the culture of leadership and guidance at this level. I share a detailed description of the district's contextual features to enhance one's understanding of the broader educational atmosphere and vision. Specifically, I showcase the artifact analysis findings to disclose: (1) supportive teacher resources related to the reform, (2) the professional development plan for teachers, and (3) the alternative assessments for sixth and seventh grade social studies.

In the district, central office served as the control center through which leadership and guidance are provided. I begin by outlining Landstone's Strategic Plan/Framework – the torch lighting the way for all instructional personnel – which is broken down into the five main tenets by which it stands. Next, I share the demographics of Landstone to shed light on the variances among the student population. This is followed by the results from the district's school climate survey to highlight the educational dispositions among middle school teachers' and students pertaining to topics related to the culture of teaching and learning. I conclude by showcasing the supportive, teacher resources (i.e., online resources, alternative assessments), that were provided by the Department of Secondary Teaching and Learning, used to carry out the reform.

Central Office Leadership

Every five years, Landstone's Superintendent and school board introduce a new Strategic Plan that features the future vision for the district. The most recently adopted Strategic Plan from 2015, with a vision toward the year 2020, featured five pathways serving as the focus in creating a culture of excellence within the district. This was a continuation of the direction the district had outlined in its previous Strategic Plan leading up to the year 2015, to include ongoing

focus and development with implementing a system of balanced assessments consisting of alternative or performance-based measures in grades K-12 (Abbott, 2015). These pathways are outlined in the Superintendent's Executive Summary, summarized in Figure 4.1 below.

Figure 4.1 The Superintendent's Executive Summary

Pathway 1- The first pathway emphasizes quality instruction with the following characteristics: Use of balanced assessments to inform instruction, the use of research-based pedagogical practices, rigorous and conceptually-based curriculum, and a focus on college and career readiness for all graduates.
Pathway 2- The next pathway stresses the need for qualified educational stakeholders within the district. This includes an examination of the recruitment and retention of staff, central office roles and responsibilities, and professional development offerings to enhance instructional methods.
Pathway 3- Student-centeredness is the focus of the third pathway, to be achieved in the decision-making of what's in the best interest of students, and the use of data to make instructional decisions. Support through student interventions (i.e., academies, advanced programs) and a technological infrastructure are just a couple of initiatives worthy of noting.
Pathways 4 and 5- The fourth and fifth pathways were created with intentions to maintain community relations both within the district and within the broader community. Internally, organizational improvement will be attained through clearly defined and common expectations for respect amongst all members, to include practices that support diversity and equity. Outside of the schools, students and staff should capitalize on opportunities for expansive learning beyond the classroom walls.

Although these paths are not certain to reach their intended destinations of student success, they serve as benchmarks, or stepping stones, to gauge progress moving forward in the years to come. Notably, there is alignment between the pathways of the Superintendent's Executive Summary a summary for the Strategic Plan as the summary offers a summarized version of the main points further elaborated upon in the district plan.

Landstone City Public School's Strategic Plan

Landstone's strategic framework outlined the vision for teaching and learning to ensure every student could reach his or her potential by way of quality instruction and educational

support. *This framework was established in 2015 to serve as a guide for the district during the next five years. Putting this framework into practice requires support and advocacy from district-level and school personnel so that students are challenged and supported in their learning.*

Within the domain of teaching and learning, efforts made inside the classroom to best prepare and challenge students hinge upon certain pedagogical beliefs and collaborative efforts among educators. Optimal success in classrooms requires the essential elements of instructional planning, delivery, and assessment, leading to a safe and effective learning atmospheres for students. There are four main goals featured within the district’s strategic framework for optimal teaching and learning – high academic expectations, multiple pathways, social-emotional development, and culture of growth and excellence. I summarize the goals, each in turn, drawing attention to the most salient details of each.

Goal I: High academic expectations. A focus on high standards of academic performance and growth highlights the following initiatives: a push for K-12 literacy across all curricular areas; implementation of varied assessment formats, standards and performance-based; experiential learning that fosters inquiry, and the incorporation of 21st century skills in lessons across all areas (i.e., STEM, world languages, health, language arts, etc...). Benchmark indicators include: students reading on grade level, SOL scores, and attainment of proficient or above on performance-based assessments administered district-wide in grades four, seven, and eleven.

Goal II: Multiple pathways. Second, there is a priority of personalized learning to prepare students for future aspirations. Highlights include the use of learner profile data to support career and academic interests, and middle school and high school recognition of career awareness and exploration. Benchmark indicators include: analyzing graduation rates, PSAT

scores, and the establishment and maintenance of partnerships with community colleges, universities, and technical-career education programs.

Goal III: Social-emotional development. Third, the whole child is recognized through the growth and development of the academic, social, and emotional domains. Maintaining a safe learning environment is pivotal to this charge, alongside opportunities for students to practice resilience and decision-making. Benchmark indicators include: solicited survey data reflecting the levels of safety and morale.

Goal IV: Culture of growth and excellence. Lastly, growing a culture of communication and excellence is a goal attained through establishing high-quality staff and positive community relations at-large. Teacher talent is recruited through multiple pathways, and high-quality teaching is maintained through the variety of professional learning opportunities and high-quality resources. Military, business, and civic agencies serve as partners in education to strengthen the learning opportunities in the schools for all students. Benchmark indicators include: summative teacher evaluation data, financial support for professional learning certificates (i.e., National Board Certification, Master's degree),

College and career development. One particular objective of the district is the college and career preparedness for graduate students, which is attained through the inspiration, guidance, and the collaboration across the division. The district is dedicated to providing advanced programming, such as through the International Baccalaureate program and several academies catering to world language, STEM, law, medical, and the performing arts. Partnerships through community colleges and vocational programs are established between several high school and local centers.

Demographics and School Climate

The characteristics of the division's staff and students serve as a backdrop in this study, bringing greater understanding to the culture of teaching and learning, and ultimately the phenomenon. In general, the Landstone Public School District serves as a sought-after district for employment by professionals in various aspects of education, and a desirable system for families to enroll their students. According to the most recent 2015-2016 report on student characteristics in grades K-12, the district was comprised of over 50,000 students, 50 schools, and 10,000 employees. From highest to lowest, the student demographics were 50% White, 23% African American, 11 % Hispanic/Latino, 9 % Multiracial, and 5 % Asian. Slightly over half of the student population were male in comparison to females, while over one-third of the population was considered Economically Disadvantaged, as determined by those who qualify for free-and-reduced lunch programs. As for special populations, over 10% of the student population was categorized as Gifted and Students with Disabilities, while less than 3% of the population were Limited English Proficient. Trends in data reports for the past five years do not reflect much fluctuation; therefore, these measures may serve as relative indicators of the student demographics for the 2016-2017 school year and beyond.

School climate survey. Biennially, the division administers a climate survey to teachers and administrators, students, and families. The most recent 2014-2015 survey was segmented into questions regarding instructional programs, academic support, interpersonal relationships, communication and collaboration, as well as safety and environment. Response options included “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree.” Table 4.1 below features sample responses from middle school teachers (54 % response rate), all schools (50% response rate), and middle school students (83% response rate) as these stakeholders are directly related to the study. Agreement was a compiled score of “strongly agree” and “agree” responses. For the purposes of

this study, I selected the seven statements from the survey pertinent to the investigation, and chose to include only the results of teachers, administrators, and students. Middle school data is presented alongside “all school” data for context and comparison. It is again necessary to note that these results are shared to serve as indicators of the district’s climate.

Table 4.1 Middle School Climate Survey Data

Statement	Middle School Teachers & Administrators- Agreement	<i>*All T & A in the Division- Agreement</i>	Middle School Student- Agreement	<i>*All Schools Student- Agreement</i>
This school provides students with a high-quality education.	97%	96%	81%	87%
Students actively participate in classroom activities.	90%	91%	61%	70%
This school provides high-quality instruction and services in the area of Social Studies.	97%	95%	90%	93%
This school respects diversity and welcomes all cultures.	95%	96%	81%	87%
Teachers and administrators work well together	82%	79%	NA	NA
This school provides a safe and orderly place for students to learn.	94%	93%	74%	83%
The school’s facilities are sufficient to support student learning.	91%	89%	NA	NA

Note: T = teachers; A = administrators

Based on the survey response rates, the most favorable results suggest middle schools provided a high-quality education, high-quality social studies instruction, and respect diversity in the welcoming of all cultures.

Department of Secondary Teaching and Learning: Supportive Resources

The Secondary Social Studies Curriculum website created by the district served as a space to access a myriad of supportive resources in one general location. Upon the first visit, I found the site to be easy to navigate, visually appealing, and well-organized by topics and guidance features (i.e., headings). Featured on the Home page was contact information for the Coordinator and Instructional Specialist, while the Philosophy of the Social Studies Program was provided front and center. This read more as a mission statement, including efforts to incorporate concepts from various disciplines (i.e., geography, history, political science, economics, sociology, anthropology, and psychology) and values to understand the changing relationships between people and environments over time. Additionally, the Home page described how social studies content, processes, and skill sets were woven into the fabric of K-12 curriculum to ensure student development across the continuum.

Featured on a side panel were tabs and links that are directly related to this study:

- 6th Grade Alternative Assessments;
- 7th Grade Alternative Assessments;
- Developing Thinking Skills in the Secondary Social Studies Classroom;
- Middle School Social Studies Toolbox;
- Alignment Charts; and
- Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) Social Studies Page.

Additional conveniences for a social studies teacher included hyperlinked units under the “Middle School Social Studies Courses.” Within the toolbox I found each unit to be complete with SOL and district standards, which are now assessed through alternative means as compared to a single end-of-year standardized assessment (i.e., SOL test) in previous years. The curricular

units featured in the Social Studies Toolbox are found below in Table 4.2. For the purposes of this study the titles have been modified by topic to protect the anonymity of the district.

Table 4.2 Curricular Units: Sixth and Seventh Grade Social Studies

Grade 6 US History to 1865	Grade 7 US History to the Present
Unit 1- North America Before 1500	Unit 1- The Nation Reunites
Unit 2- European Exploration	Unit 2- New Business
Unit 3- Colonial America	Unit 3- A New Nation
Unit 4- The American Revolution	Unit 4- Competition & Conflict
Unit 5- A New Government	Unit 5- Progressive Era
Unit 6- The Identity of America	Unit 6- World War I
Unit 7- The Age of Jackson	Unit 7- American 1920s/1930s
Unit 8- Westward Expansion	Unit 8- World War II
Unit 9- (Pre) Civil War	Unit 9- A Time of Peace
Unit 10- The Civil War	Unit 10- Conflict (America and Abroad)

The alternative assessments designed by the district were intended to align with specific content strands woven throughout various units. Additionally, assessments were intended to be administered intermittently during the school year, approximately 1-2 per quarter, as opposed to one per unit.

Professional Development: Grades 6 and 7 Social Studies-Training Summary

The overarching goal of the professional development training sessions was to inform teachers of the 2014 Virginia legislation and how it has impacted the disciplines of sixth and seventh grade social studies. In this section I summarize the training as it occurred, while highlighting the salient aspects that relate to the phenomenon of this study.

The professional development facilitators began by establishing a platform for the training, to which they unpacked the State Superintendent's Memo to provide a better understanding of the state's rationale for, and vision of, the reform. The specific excerpts shared with teachers included the following key phrases:

- “...to eliminate some of the tests used for accountability;”
- “...to encourage the collaboration of teachers within grades and across grades in implementing the assessments;”
- “...to encourage the use of assessments that may be used by teachers to improve their instruction;” and
- “This should be viewed as an opportunity to engage in innovation...”

The division’s main learning target for the presentation was to advance an understanding of the newly adopted alternative assessments and the role they played within a balanced assessment system. Next, the facilitators eased participants into an overview of how the district has decidedly responded to the elimination of the SOL tests with a developed action plan that addresses the state’s mandates associated with the reform. A significant moment during this portion of the training included an explanation of “local control,” and how the VDOE has granted local divisions the autonomy to design an alternative assessment for each subject area in which an SOL test was removed.

Introduction to performance-based assessments. Introductions to the performance-based assessments, and the role they play within social studies teaching and learning, became the crux of the training session. The facilitators used the terms of performance-based assessments and alternative assessments synonymously; therefore, I follow suit in the remaining sections of this chapter. To begin, performance-based assessments (PBA) were introduced as a format that allows students to demonstrate content knowledge *and* content process skills. During a comparison of old versus new assessment methods, it was acknowledged that although SOL assessments (i.e., multiple-choice formats) can play a role in a “balanced assessment system,” their aim is more geared towards memorization of facts. It was shared how typically, the

traditional assessments used in schools test students' capacity to retain and share information rather than provide students with opportunities to demonstrate true understanding of the learning. In comparison, this was notably different from the intended purposes of a PBA, which were described to be more comprehensive and rigorous. From this point, the workshop leaders led participants through a series of steps to further unpack the purpose and use of PBAs to enhance student learning. Throughout this process the following statements were used:

- completion of real world tasks;
- designed to measure standards;
- allow students to engage in 21st century skills;
- used in a formative or summative manner;
- provide teachers with important student feedback data to gauge quality performance; and
- range in scope -- from quick activities to summative projects.

Historical thinking skills and processes. As the teachers were expected to prepare students for the alternative assessments, it became necessary for the facilitators of the training to feature the characteristics of “high quality assessments.” Upon evaluating a PBA for its quality, the following “look fors” within the task itself were shared, which I summarize:

- Capitalize on the learning objectives (i.e. SOLs) addressed in the assessment;
- Activities and tasks stimulate thinking and engage student interest;
- The response format aligns with the task;
- The prompt is clear and concise and meets students' readiness levels; and
- Evaluation criteria are shared through a rubric to measure the intended outcomes.

Secondly, the training session emphasized integral information about PBAs, such as that they allow students to apply knowledge toward real world applications. An element of authenticity

was encouraged, as students are provided opportunities to engage in the role of a historian and demonstrate associated skill sets, such as:

- Interpret primary and secondary sources;
- Make connections between past and present;
- Analyze maps; and
- Interpret slogans, political cartoons, speeches, and propaganda.

Lastly, it was recognized that rather than answering multiple choice questions, a PBA allows students to examine content through higher-level thinking processes, which are more sophisticated and challenging when compared to selecting a letter for an answer. Such methods ask students to: Evaluate issues; analyze trends; defend a position, or engage in a debate.

Modeling the expectations. The next portion of the training engaged participants with exemplary tasks featuring the historical thinking skills encouraged by Sam Wineburg (Wineburg, 1991; Wineburg & Reisman, 2015), a representative of the Stanford History Group. From this work, three particular skill sets the division aimed for through student engagement were: sourcing, contextualizing, and corroborating. The training facilitators suggested to teachers that the tasks featured through the Stanford History Group would provide the ongoing practice students would need to prepare for the districtwide performance-based assessments.

VDOE guidelines for local alternative assessments (2014-2015). The initial guidelines provided by the state through the State Superintendent’s 2014 memo (2014) were intended to be used during the first trial year of 2014-2015. From this VDOE memo, the facilitators referenced how the district-generated performance tasks, intended for teachers’ use with students in the classroom, ought to consider “quality design characteristics.” Specifically, the following ideas presented below were highlighted in the memo. The alternative assessment(s) should be:

- Age-appropriate;
- Authentic/performance-based;
- Aligned to each strand or reporting category (not all content standards within a strand or reporting category must be addressed;
- A single assessment or a collection of assessments (including tests in conjunction with alternative assessments);
- Integrated in one or more subjects (e.g., history and writing); and
- Accompanied by a rubric (or another form of scoring criteria).

Performance-based assessment: Review. During the last portion of the workshop, leaders led attendees through a review of the PBAs, respective to their grade levels, which were now embedded in their curriculum and to be administered with students intermittently during the 2015-2016 school year. Participants were provided a numbered folder with the alternative assessments inside to review with a “shoulder partner.” While partners reviewed the assessments they were provided a set of questions to consider and discuss:

- What specific content skills would the student need to use in order to complete the task?
- How is this assessment more effective than a traditional assessment? and
- What skills from areas outside of this subject does this assessment reinforce?

Additional time was provided for culminating conversations, which allowed for participants to debrief and share understandings.

Accompanying rubrics. Significant to this point in the training was the attention paid toward evaluating the rubrics that accompanied the PBAs, designed to measure levels of student performance. Time spent with the rubrics allowed participants to unpack the assessment measures (i.e., standards) that accompanied the tasks. Generally, the rubrics contained three

criteria, or areas for assessment: Evidence, Reasoning, and Communication. There were four possible levels of performance for each criterion: Advanced (4), Proficient (3), Novice (2), and Emerging (1). For the criterion of “Evidence” statements provided in the rubric were those such as: “Interpretation of sources is ...” and “Evidence references is relevant/not relevant to ...” The criterion of “Reasoning” featured statements such as “The link between the evidence and the argument is ...” and “Generalizations/ conclusions/ inferences are ...” Finally, the criterion of “Communication” contained starters such as “The argument is.....,” “Content vocabulary is used.....,” and “The Explanation is.....”

Several assessments included a student checklist, used for scaffolding purposes. Included in the checklist were boxes for the student to check after completion of the tasks, such as:

- I read each question carefully and determined what was asked;
- I examined all the evidence;
- I explained how each piece of evidence I chose supports my answer; and
- I answered all parts of the question;

Accountability. To conclude the session, the facilitators explained the procedures and the methods of reporting scores to the Department of Teaching and Learning. Participants were expected to meet in professional learning communities (PLCs) to look at students’ work samples. Notably, teachers have had experience working within these communities prior to the reform; however, the actions conducted with respect to assessment was aligned with the old assessment system with disaggregating student SOL testing data. To meet the needs of scoring the new alternative assessments, calibration and scoring were to be conducted collaboratively, while colleagues provided support to one another throughout the processes. Student work samples, representing one of each of the performance levels 1, 2, 3, and 4, were to be scanned into a pdf

document, printed, and sent to the Secondary Social Studies Coordinator by the school's administrator. The facilitators explained that this process would ensure the tasks were being administered across the schools and would allow the department to monitor middle schools' progress across the district.

Alternative Assessments: Social Studies Artifact Analysis

The artifacts I analyze in this section are the alternative, performance-based tasks, or PBAs, selected by the district to be administered by 6th/7th grade social studies teachers. In order to link case study data to concepts that provide direction in the analysis phase I relied on two “analytic techniques” or strategies suggested by Yin (2014). First through “pattern matching,” it was my aim to strengthen internal validity by defining previously established patterns (prior to the study) that complement those found through my analysis. To that end, I relied on the “NCSS Framework of Qualities of Powerful and Authentic Social Studies,” presented as Figure 2.2 in Chapter II, as a guide throughout the analysis process for its

Table 4.3 Qualities of Powerful and Authentic Social Studies

Qualities	Definitions
Meaningful	Studies build curriculum networks of knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes that are structured around enduring understandings, essential questions, important ideas, and goals.
Integrative	Curriculum addresses the totality of human experience, it includes materials drawn from the arts, sciences, and humanities, from current events, from local examples and from students' own lives.
Value-Based	Students engage in experiences that encourage recognition and serious consideration of opposing points of view, respect for well-supported positions, and sensitivity to cultural similarities and differences.
Challenging	Inclusion of the teaching of sophisticated concepts and ideas, with deep processing and detailed study of each topic.

Active	Students process and think about what they are learning through rich and varied sources to reach understandings and make decisions—not just “hands-on,” but also “minds-on.”
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(Adapted from NCSS, 2008 <http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/powerful>)

descriptive conditions of exemplary social studies tasks. Next, explanation building was used to show “how” these patterns provided critical insight into authentic social studies engagement. I engaged in a series of iterations to compare one alternative task to the next. Finally, I re-examined my evidence, as a whole, to redefine the five qualities of the framework based on how they were featured within the context of the PBAs. Table 4.3 below has been condensed and adapted to feature these essential elements (i.e., qualities and definition). In the sections that follow, I share my analysis of the PBAs created by the district, as they align with this framework.

Integrative and written communication. Through open-response, students were afforded the opportunity to demonstrate understanding of the social studies content through communicative forms of writing. For each alternative assessment, three or more opportunities were provided for written communication, with varying formats and audiences. First, the formats were integrative in nature, specifically as the social studies content knowledge were strategically integrated with literacy skills and processes. For example, a prompt from a 6th grade Civil War Assessment asked students to think as a historian, and “Choose one of the documents and describe why it had the greatest impact on history.” In a 7th grade task featuring the Civil Rights Movement, students were asked to think analytically while comparing two historical letters, then respond to the prompts of “Letter ____ was likely written first because....” “Letter ____ was likely written last because...” In both instances, proficiency of historical knowledge and processing skill sets (i.e., sequencing, corroboration) could be assessed by a teacher using criterion rubrics.

Challenging. Critical thinking was reinforced through concept-based questions, important ideas, and historical perceptions. Because these tasks were intended for formative assessment purposes, such engagement signified the building and fostering of historical literacy and conceptual understanding. For instance, each task engaged students in identifying social, political and/or economic change. Additionally, the tasks required students to explain their interpretation of maps and charts/tables, and work with big ideas and concepts such as democracy, discrimination, diversity and antagonism. Sophisticated use of vocabulary, specific to the language of historians, was used in writing prompts, such as in "...maintaining a lucrative business," and "...the invention reinvigorated the slave economy." In several instances, students engaged in critical thinking to examine, identify, and/or explain a recommendation based on a series of primary source images. Specifically, students were asked to select which primary source document "...best demonstrates the widespread social and economic changes that took place."

Meaningful. To be meaningful, students must consider the context of their responses. Across the alternative assessments was consideration for viewpoints, audience, and historical scenarios. In several instances, students' reading comprehension was reinforced through the provisions of background information for context purposes, such as with the NAACP and Spanish and American Indians. The objective of the assessment was to activate prior knowledge that could be used while engaging students in an authentic historical role to compose a recommendation. For example, in a 6th grade task students engaged as a historian researching the West in the 1800s: "As an apprentice to a historical author, the task is to select the best source that identifies the reasons people moved west." In a 7th grade task, students engaged in the authentic role as a museum exhibitor, while the context is described as, "You are helping to

advertise the opening of a new museum exhibit...” and the objective is to select the most authentic, historical piece(s) for display, with rationale.

Value-based/corroboration. In order to corroborate, students must draw upon evidence to support a position through rationale and justification. Several tasks called for this engagement while supplying a myriad of primary and secondary sources, such as: artwork, photographs, journal entries, newspaper articles, excerpts from historical documents, political cartoons, historical letters, and advertisements. Using these sources, students were asked to support their best positions based on the given prompts. For example, one prompt stated “Based on the quote, predict the interactions of the Spanish and American Indians.” Engagement in processing skills, such as compare/contrast, analyze, and/or synthesize data, was featured in multiple tasks. For example, in a 6th grade task, the student is asked to “Describe how the cotton gin was both a blessing and a curse.”

Authentic sources. Overall, active and authentic learning was reinforced through rich and varied sources (i.e., primary or secondary) to which students became both “minds on” and interactive. Each alternative assessment featured at least two or more primary sources, to which many included additional secondary sources. Situations were meaningful and relevant, such as in a 7th grade task featuring women’s fight for voting rights and the provision of a testimony from a woman on trial for exercising a citizen’s right to vote. In another task, photos featuring men in bread lines, prohibition, and the Ford assembly lines highlighted the context of the economic changes in the 1920s/1930s. Similarly, a 6th grade task featured an excerpt from the Declaration of Independence, the artwork of Washington and the Inaugural Address, and a political cartoon featuring women and the Constitution, all of which represent social and political change in the establishment of a democracy.

Considerations for teaching and learning. The alternative assessments contained common elements related to 21st century education – thinking critically, problem-solving, and communicating effectively through writing. In order for students to perform with proficiency, practice and familiarity with such skills is required through the sequence of teaching and learning. This is especially true with regard to the following actions embedded in the PBAs: Compose an argument (i.e., persuasive writing), use evidence to support reasoning in a response, use of language relevant to the discipline of social studies, and interpret charts/graphs and historical sources. Furthermore, teacher modeling through the analysis of primary and secondary sources (i.e., political documents, political cartoons, newspaper articles, advertisements/propaganda, authentic texts, historical artwork, and historical journals) is necessary. Lastly, engagement in performance tasks outside of those required by the district would assist students with the practice necessary to instill confidence when confronted with authentic roles, audiences, formats, and topics in the PBAs.

Social studies teachers may choose to seek additional resources and support through disciplinary teachers in their respective areas of art, mathematics, and language arts. The committee that selected and designed the alternative assessments through the district relied on outside resources for 6th and 7th grade tasks, such as the Library of Congress: Teaching with Primary Sources (<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/tps/>), Stanford History Education Group (<https://sheg.stanford.edu/>), and The History Channel website (<http://www.history.com/>).

Participating Schools – Kingsville and Smithtown Middle Schools: Exosystem Part II

Upon initiating a meeting with two potential schools for this study, there was an immediate, positive response from administration. Both administrators were eager to assist with the study, as they understood the professional benefits it might offer their social studies teachers

professional growth through reflection of their practice. The administrators offered names of eligible teachers that met criteria for participation, and granted permission to make initial contact. Albeit, I understood the final decision to participate was left entirely to the teachers. For the purposes of this study, I use the pseudonyms of Kingsville and Smithtown to represent grades 6 and 7 at their respective sites.

Kingsville and Smithtown Middle Schools indicated celebration of student excellence, which was visibly present in several ways in each school. The administrative mission featured on the website of Kingsville Middle School discussed how faculty and staff, in partnership with the community, were dedicated to provide the necessary learning environment for students to reach their potential. The marquee outside of this school celebrated student accomplishments in the areas of sports, academics, and the arts. Similar in student-centeredness, upon entering the main hallway of Smithtown a large mission statement hung in clear sight for all to see. Simple yet impactful, it outlined a mission to ensure that each student reached his/her greatest potential. The school opened its doors to students in 1974 as a junior high, serving students in grades 6-8. As first impressions, I found the actions of both schools to be quite telling with regard to the extent in which students and staff were valued.

School Report Cards

The purpose of the Annual School Report Card is twofold: first to communicate the educational accountability with a variety of stakeholder audiences, and second to share the alignment of student performance with the 21st century learning outcomes outlines in the district's strategic plan. School report cards are made available for public viewing the following school year, and share data regarding students, staff, and school performance, therefore, I had access to data featuring the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years.

During the 2015-2016 school year, both middle schools had a single administrator assigned to each grade level (sixth, seventh, and eighth grade). At Kingsville, there were approximately 1,100 students in the school with the following characteristics: 72% White, 10% African American, 8% Hispanic, 7% Multiracial, and 3% Asian. Nearly 70% of sixth graders were reading on grade level, according to the Reading Inventory (RI) Performance data. At Smithtown, there were approximately 1,200 students in the school with the following characteristics: 57% White, 21% African American, 10% Hispanic, 8% Multiracial, and 4 % Asian. Roughly 65% of seventh graders were reading on grade level (per RI data). Both schools were fully accredited based on the state accreditation status during the 2015-2016 school year, and both schools met all of the annual measureable objectives associated with the federal accountability status. The schools are located within 10 miles of one another in the Landstone district.

Plan for continuous improvement. A school's Plan for Continuous Improvement (PCI) reflects an action plan dedicated to the student learning outcomes of academic proficiency. The purpose of the PCI plan is to identify the timely, measurable outcomes a school sets for its students, and develop a collaborative plan for achieving the desired outcomes. The 2014-2015 school plans were made available for public viewing on the district's website.

At Kingsville Middle School, the SMART (specific, measureable, attainable, realistic, and timely) goals reflected the following: narrowing achievement gaps by ethnicity, improved SOL pass rates, and reduced student failure rate in courses. The school strived to attain these outcomes through their work in professional learning communities (PLCs), particularly to create at least one common assessment, and use baseline data from additional diagnostic assessments to design mini-lessons aligned with areas of need. Additional implementations included the use of

data-driven improvement planning processes for data analysis (i.e., student work samples). The administration conducted learning walks and learning plan reviews, and attended PLC sessions to provide feedback. One significant goal included support of math instruction in all content areas to enhance mathematical literacy. To attain the PCI action plan goals, a full time math coach and funds for additional SOL and Algebra-readiness tutoring were requested by the schools' administrators.

At Smithtown Middle School, the SMART goal reflected increasing the number of students receiving "proficient" on the SOL tests by 15% in all core content areas. The school aimed to attain these outcomes through their work in PLCs to disaggregate data in determining achievement gaps, and develop higher order thinking and technology-enhanced assessment items for students' SOL practice. Additional implementations included creating common assessments and accompanying rubrics in PLCs for measuring students' mastery of content and skills. One specific goal to enhance literacy more broadly included targets of social studies and science grades 6 and 7 for intensive literacy focus with a part-time literacy coach. In the attainment of PCI, action plan goals, the administration planned to conduct formal and informal observations, and learning walks, to monitor progress. Additionally, Smithtown hosts the Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) program that promotes college dreams. Several AVID literacy and organizational teaching methods stretched beyond the boundaries of the program and permeated the entire school to support college and career readiness skills.

In summary, both middle schools appeared committed to their work in PLCs to create common assessments, and use data-informed decision making for instructional planning. The leadership of administration and support from instructional coaches for teachers appeared to be valued for the sake of student learning. Although both PCI plans reflect goals related to

improved SOL scores, which no longer pertains to social studies teachers, there is still an extent to which all teachers within a school become responsible for their attainment through collaborative efforts.

The Participants – The Microsystem

In the following sections I feature the participants from within the case on two levels – district and classroom. The district-level participants assisted as secondary participants while the classroom teachers served as the primary participants in the research. Although secondary participants were valuable to the study, primary participants had more of a stake in the investigation; therefore, I provide greater attention to their educational roles and experiences, and philosophical beliefs.

Central Office Personnel: An Overview

The following Landstone district leaders were represented in the previous study (Abbott, 2015) and were specifically featured in this research to revisit the protocols and procedures implemented during the 2014-2015 school year. Upon initial introduction of the 2014 Virginia legislation, these leaders were tasked with devising an instructional plan of action for the division to carry out. In this study, their roles became significant to the research as they disclosed pertinent details related to the assessment reform moving into the 2015-2016 school year (i.e., professional development training, PBAs, data analysis and reporting). Specifically, their central office positions oversaw the five academic areas impacted by the 2014 VA legislation, at the elementary and secondary levels. For the purposes of protecting all identities in this study, I rely on pseudonyms.

The Executive Director of Secondary Teaching and Learning, Dr. Smith, supervises curriculum in grades 6-12, among several other division responsibilities pertaining to technology

and the arts. The division's Chief Academic Officer, Dr. Jones, oversees the Department of Teaching and Learning with the assistance of four Executive Directors and three Directors, who directly oversee their respective offices within the Department of Teaching and Learning.

Finally, the Secondary Social Studies Coordinator, Ms. Pratt, improves instructional practices, to include writing curriculum, and is tasked with establishing and facilitating various committees.

Although participants are relatively new to their roles, each has served in the field of education for over 20 years.

Teachers' Biographies

I was fortunate to have gleaned a first-hand perspective with respect to the teachers' professional practice through analysis of their demographic data and by engaging in multiple rounds of interviews. As I introduce each teacher in turn, I provide a generalized title that encompasses the uniqueness in perspective and philosophy the individual has brought to the study. In the sharing of teachers' biographies I capitalize on their voices to share their stories, to aid in authenticity. The biographies begin by featuring the sixth grade teachers from Kingsville Middle School, as the attention is then transitioned toward the seventh grade participants from Smithtown Middle School.

Steve: The innovator & creative producer. Steve is a product of the Landstone Public Schools, and chose to stay quite close to home while obtaining his undergraduate and graduate-level degrees and starting his teaching career. He summarizes his job as teaching the Social Studies curriculum by providing rigor and relevance to his lessons. Steve feels it is his job to maximize student engagement, create opportunities for higher-level thinking and to prepare his students for the future. He has taught 14 years total in the school district, 13 of which were spent teaching 8th Grade Civics. This is his 2nd year teaching sixth grade social studies and English.

He has 2 classes of sixth grade social studies, with 24 and 31 students, respectively, which require his attendance to a spectrum of needs. His class of 24 students is generally the needier of the two, to which there are a handful of students with Individual Education Plans and 504 plans. His class of 31 students is comprised of mostly his advanced students, with 6 students identified as intellectually gifted.

Philosophy of teaching and learning. Steve explained how his “work” is done in the planning, where his “real job is to plan out a lesson that not only teaches them [students], but they’re doing most of the work.” In other words, he is not talking for a long time, and prefers that students’ voices take up the majority of class time. Upon describing his instructional sequencing, he stated how he strives “to use their prior knowledge”, and in his words, “I want to use quick lessons to then get them working on collaborative work, or get them quickly into a performance task that I’ve written.” He feels confident in his abilities to write performance tasks, “it’s what I’m good at,” as he pointed to past mentors who have taught him to combine Blooms [taxonomy] and higher-level thinking. Steve considered himself fortunate to have principals that encouraged his creativity throughout his professional career.

When assessing students, Steve looks for “other things” outside of the content, such as the “higher-level stuff you can’t always quantify, such as “Are they able to be persuasive? Are they able to present in front of a group? Are they able to collaborate?” He advocates for technological literacy, because “[students] have to learn technology and embrace it, and use it in their tasks because it’s only going to be thrown at them more in the future.” According to Steve, he is teaching them “life skills they can take with them anywhere and everywhere.”

Ultimately, Steve’s goal is to make learning history real for his students. He will set them up with materials to form an argument to be persuasive and to find evidence, “all the things

that are required of them through a performance task.” Steve shared how student responses to his performance tasks are filled with “excitement,” and specific responses such as “I want to be a lawyer some day” and “Can we do this again?” Although he may not know what is in store for his students’ futures, he stated “It sure is fun to think about the fact that we can motivate them in that way.”

Deedra: It is all about inquiry. Deedra was new to the profession of teaching, with this being her first full year serving as a grade six social studies teacher. During the 2014-2015 school year she served as a long-term, permanent substitute in sixth grade social studies during the months of April through June. These months provided her the opportunity and experience to administer two of the spring alternative assessments. In a summary of her job description, she stated her responsibility “to plan and provide for appropriate learning experiences for students by developing, selecting, and modifying instructional plans and materials to meet the needs of all students.” Additionally, she felt professionally responsible to “maintain appropriate student records that signified growth” and follow all required procedures and best pedagogical practices. To obtain her teaching certification she attended a nearby university’s career switcher program.

Philosophy of teaching and learning. Deedra felt that she learns more from her students by “asking the right questions, because then the students really get excited and they start thinking, and then they begin debating among one another and questioning things.” She shared her love for this aspect of teaching to which she can challenge her students and they can in turn challenge one another. For example, she would say, “OK, don’t just take what that person said at face value” or “Don’t just take what you just read... What about that?” In her opinion, she consistently models the use of inquiry and uses probing effectively to take her students to the next level.

During instructional moments of asking students “why” is “where their brains process and start turning on” (Deedra). Further explanation is provided through her rationale within context:

This is important because once kids understand why we do something the more likely they are to accept it. I think that for them it’s a validation ...I think that’s for everyone.

If you don’t understand why you’re learning or doing something then it has no value and no real connection to you (Deedra).

Deedra relied on ways to “stretch her students” by incorporating the political, the social, and the economic aspects of history. These themes are throughout her units as if they were a fluid language; she desires for her students to be constantly thinking about the political, social, and economic side of things and remain curious as to how it all relates to the context she is teaching. Deedra models the inquiry process by posing questions, such as when asking “I wonder what happened after that?” attempting to make connections between historical events. Deedra cites specific questions she uses to foster “higher-level thinking,” such as “How do you infer something from what they [authors/historians] just said to come up with another conclusion?” and to make connections by asking, “How do we take what has happened in the past and how do we apply it to the future, and to the present?”

As a new teacher to the profession, one of Deedra’s professed goals was to integrate a new technology strategy every month to further motivate her students, even when it is a steep learning curve. With regard to the profession, she has learned “the biggest thing is knowing that it’s OK to be overwhelmed.” Professionally, she felt she has grown tremendously from the feedback of her administration during classroom observations and follow-up feedback sessions.

Lisa: The linguistic storyteller. Lisa has taught sixth grade social studies at Kingsville Middle School for the past 8 years. She has performed in two leadership capacities at the school, as a member of the Instructional Leadership Team while making instructional decisions that are in the best interest of the school and serving as the grade level chair for social studies. She has spent 24 years serving the district, to which 16 of those years were spent teaching 4th and 5th grade at the elementary level. During the 2014-2015 school year, Lisa served on the Alternative Assessment Development Committee for the district to assist in the development of the locally-developed assessments for grade six.

Philosophy of teaching and learning. In Lisa's words, "just to see their [students'] creativity come out has been really fun the last two years." For her, it has been most interesting to see the students at work, "especially when you give them what they need and then they go for it" (Lisa). In her classroom, incorporating team-teaching and peer-teaching in her practice has brought her joy and satisfaction:

Really, it's the students interacting with one another, and walking around to hear the questions they are asking one another is amazing. When I sit down like the way I am with you, and I have kids' full attention, you know 11 and 12 year olds looking me in the eye and we're listening, talking, and sharing, and I have them engaged, it's goose-bumpy....it's good stuff (Lisa).

Lisa values the dialogue and civil discourse in her classroom, as she aims for her students to be successful leaving 6th grade "and be able to do a Socratic Seminar in 7th grade, or do open discussions with one another." Ultimately, she wants them "to enjoy learning and develop a love of history." She expressed great importance for her students to understand the evolution of history, how it is cyclical and constantly changing, "that's the exciting part about it." According

to her, “history is not just dates and times, even when it’s from long ago, it can still be fun and interesting for kids.”

Lisa acknowledged that in regard to the significant events happening in our world today, “twenty years from now these kids will be reading about what we were doing.” She tries to tell history as a story throughout the school year, mainly to instill an understanding of how our country became our country. In Lisa’s opinion, “A lot of people think history is just memorization, but really it is a story, and everything ties into the next event.”

Jill: Thinking like a historian. Jill served as a seventh grade social studies teacher (i.e., US History 1865 to Present) at Smithtown Middle School to a total of 126 seventh graders. Outside of her teaching responsibilities, she felt fulfilled in her roles as a school sponsor for The Fellowship of Christian Athletes and the Culture Club. She also remained a standing member of the Anti-Bullying Committee and the Student Recognition Committee.

Jill has a total of 19 years of teaching experience, at multiple levels and in various countries. Her professional career began with teaching English as a Second Language to middle school and high school public school students. She simultaneously taught adult learners through an Intensive English program at the college level. Next, she moved into middle school English and taught two years with 7th and 8th graders in Florida, followed by four years teaching abroad as an ESL teacher in Tanzania and England. For the past 11 years she has been teaching at her current middle school, comprised of two years of teaching English 7 and 9 years in her current position as a seventh grade social studies teacher.

Philosophy of teaching and learning. While teaching her students about history, Jill takes pride in engaging students through integrative projects that include rigorous and challenging tasks. If and when her students have questions, she knows “they can find the

answers.” However, she has noticed over the years “more and more that students say, ‘Oh, I’ll just Google it,’ and that’s not what we do in this class.” She feels the easy way is not the most effective way to learn. Therefore, Jill extends to her students the challenge of becoming problem-solvers, because that is something she genuinely valued. She stated about her practice, “I give them experiences with problem-based activities that let them engage, because I really feel that the way they learn best is through a problem to figure out or a question to look at.”

While participating in a summer class her previous year, Jill discovered the teacher resources available through the Library of Congress and the Stanford History websites. Available for her instructional use were collections of lessons, which included primary sources, graphic organizers, and a various interdisciplinary resources (i.e., literacy, math). She shared how this class changed her practice, as she was now “on a hunt” because she thought “this just makes so much sense” upon shifting her practice toward performance-based tasks. Jill expressed that with the format of her teaching and instructional delivery, she is now “very comfortable with using primary sources.”

As a result of the changes in her practice, Jill felt “the students appreciate not having to sit and do worksheets.” She admitted there is a time and a place for reading and literacy skills, and in her words, “[t]he more I can give them to do and not have to sit...they’re much more able to remember things when they experience it.” It has become her goal to provide relevance for students with historical content, and “to take what we [teacher and students] learned and realize that what we see here in America isn’t always what it’s like in the outside world.” And for her, broadening students’ global perspectives “is always an outlying goal” (Jill).

Morgan: Producing productive citizens. Morgan is a seventh grade social studies teacher and the PLC social studies lead for her grade level at her school. Her teaching

responsibilities included four core classes of US History II (1865 to the Present). The class sizes range from 28 to 33 students, which was recently reduced from all classes of 33 to 35 students. Morgan has been quite active with her discipline and colleagues since joining the district. For example, she has served on various committees to work on curriculum, document-based questions, and district-wide formative assessments. Beyond her subject area, she has served as the lead mentor teacher, an active member of the literacy committee, sponsor of the Smile Club (community service organization), and she continues to lead a cadre of teachers with scoring performance-based assessments for the district during the summer months. Morgan has taught for 10.5 years, all at Smithtown Middle School. During these years, she has regularly taught social studies sessions of summer school in Landstone Public Schools.

Philosophy of teaching and learning. Morgan strives to provide “a tremendous amount of structure for learning” in her practice “through organization of routines and procedures to assist students while learning about history.” In her words, she felt that as a result of the variance in her lessons and the consistency in her instructional format and delivery, the students developed a great sense of expectation for their performance. Although Morgan “loves the content in her curriculum, it really is more about the skills that they’re learning.”

When Morgan originally thought she wanted to be a middle school teacher it was so that she could “be that safety net for at least a handful of kids who are going to decide in middle school that education is just not for them.” Therefore, the ultimate goal for her students was to graduate from high school, then pursue more education, “and not necessarily an academic education but perhaps even a skill-based education so they become successful adults.” If Morgan were to bump into students years from now, she would not expect them to remember a bunch of dates or specific names, but instead “to be an educated adult.”

Morgan considered herself as a teacher who is always striving to do her very best. She expressed, “Everything I do shapes my future planning, and I’m constantly thinking about why am I doing what I’m doing and what can I be doing differently?” Her philosophy with assessment speaks less to “how much you’ve done,” and more toward “how much you know.” Assessments and grading in Morgan’s classroom are based on mastery of content and mastery of the skills, “which has made things a little more challenging for the students” but she feels effective with her practice.

Bob: Finding relevance through connections. Bob has taught for a total of 20 years in two separate Virginia school districts. First, he spent 7 years teaching World History I and US History Government and Service Learning in a rural county of Virginia. He then came to the Landstone Public School district to teach World 1 History and Government at the high school level for a total of 11 years. Although he had spent only two years in his current role teaching seventh grade social studies at Smithtown Middle School, he was comfortable with the topic and the age group. He serves as a teacher to 134 students split among four classes, to which 24 of these students have specialized needs that require attention through an IEP or 504 plan. Outside of his classroom teaching duties, he is responsible for Intermural Activities, and coaches both boys and girls volleyball at the school.

Philosophy of teaching and learning. Bob is passionate about students loving the United States of America, stating “I want them to love America. I want them to have a common history, so even though we come from different backgrounds and ancestry, we do share America, we do share this country.” He feels the responsibility to reinforce the values of our country for his students. In his words, “They’re going to have to be an American. They’re going to live in this country, and they’re going to have to be able to think in whatever job they have.”

Bob strives to make connections between history, his students' world, and the world at large, to which the goal is to reinforce relevant connections. His lessons incorporated opportunities for students to find relevance in their tasks, such as having them think logically and creatively to arrive at possible solutions to historical problems, even before learning about them in class. Bob makes it a point to showcase students' ideas, as exemplified in the example he shared from his teaching of progressive reformers with students:

See, these people [reformers] aren't thinking anything totally out of the box, we have people in this class that thought the same thing." So people who are in history, they're not super-human, they're humans, and they think. This is not just what Booker T.

[Washington] thought, this is also what Tyson thought.

He consciously takes the time to teach his students how to really think since he sees this as "the main purpose of education."

With respect to instructional planning, Bob intentionally selects tasks that "have the students work as much as they can with the materials, the artifacts, the readings, and try to come up with the information themselves" instead of just delivering information to them. Recognizing the developmental needs of his students, he stated "we'll go back and discuss what it all means in a way that they understand." To reinforce student ownership of learning, Bob felt "it's more rewarding from them to come up with the answers themselves, they might not want to, but in the long-run it's more rewarding." As a result, he enjoys their smiles after knowing they worked for their solutions.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I provided analysis of internal and external contexts for *the case* by showcasing the interrelated parts that were pertinent to the phenomenon under investigation.

The Educational Environments Theoretical Framework aided in the chapter's structure, which allowed me to break down the essential elements of each level. Within the macrosystem I discussed the details of the State Superintendent's Memo, which directly impacted the work of district leaders of the exosystem. Specifically, I demonstrated the interrelatedness between the alternative assessment reform and the district's Strategic Plan/Framework, and provided additional context through the climate survey data to demonstrate the pedagogical perceptions at the middle school level. Furthermore, I unpacked the district leaders' attempts to support teachers through various online resources, the developed PBAs, and professional development training. Lastly, I presented the biographies of secondary and primary participants, those who shared their lived experiences with the phenomenon through writings and words. Primary participants in particular were described in-depth to gain greater insight of "the individual" behind each name.

In Chapter V I present the findings of the research. A brief introduction summarizes the problem and the purpose of the data collection procedures. Sections are organized around three main themes, with subsumed sub-themes and categories, which emerged from the case study and phenomenological analyses. I provide a coherent flow within and between sections featuring evidence from interviews, with contextual support from observations, artifacts/document analysis, and bridling journal excerpts.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

In this chapter I explore three themes that emerged from an in-depth investigation of alternative assessment reform enacted at the local, district level during the 2015-2016 school year. The phenomenological nature of the research served as a platform to share participants' lived experiences with the phenomenon, while the significant features of *the case* (i.e., participants' perceptions and practices around alternative assessment) were bounded by time, place, and circumstance (Yin, 2014). Specifically, the presented themes include a comprehensive description of the enactment of alternative assessment reform at the classroom level, with contextual support at the district level, to describe the educational experiences of middle school social studies teachers and district leaders carrying out the reform.

I present the themes of this case study in a descriptive, narrated fashion, relying on participants' voices to tell the stories of how the reform has impacted their epistemic belief systems and the social studies discipline. Each theme stems from the accumulated words, documented actions, and collected artifacts of participants – 6th/7th grade social studies teachers and district leaders in central office as representatives of the Landstone Public School District. More importantly, each theme is related to the research question driving this research study: How does reform focused on alternative assessment influence (a) teachers' perceptions, and (b) educational practice?

The three themes I present in this chapter are: (1) A New Beginning: Initial Perceptions and Practices; (2) Establishing Common Ground through Support: Teachers as Participants; (3) Bridging Epistemologies and Practice in Light of Reform. In the first theme, A New Beginning: Initial Perceptions and Practices, I compare teachers' initial perceptions and practices in both the

old and new assessment accountability systems. In the second theme, Establishing Common Ground through Support: Teachers as Participants, I focus on the intentions behind each of the district's supportive interventions to effectively implement the assessment reform, accompanied by the teachers' perceptions of and participation in these supports. The third theme, Bridging Epistemologies and Practice in Light of Reform, I present the ongoing development of teachers' perceptions and practices as evidence of culturally-responsive teaching that stemmed from their epistemologies of teaching and learning. While presenting the findings, I include insights and inquiry from my bridling journal to illuminate the phenomenological experiences between myself and the participants, occurring in real time and natural settings. I now turn the attention toward the first theme, A New Beginning: Initial Perceptions and Practices.

A New Beginning: Initial Perceptions and Practices

Educational reform has potential to bring a sense of “newness” into the learning environment, such as with perceptions, procedures, and practices, to which the circumstances in this study were no different. For quite some time, middle school social studies teachers in Landstone City Public Schools had been taught how to prepare students for the end-of-year, traditional standardized measures – the SOL tests. The ‘old system’ under the SOL model served as a long-lasting trend, to which student proficiency of factual knowledge was measured by means of an end-of-year, multiple-choice test score. In light of a new assessment accountability system, the state/district informed teachers they were now to engage in formative, alternative-based assessment methods to which emphasis would be placed on the quality of learning historical content while engaging students in disciplinary skill sets.

In this first finding I compare teachers' initial perceptions and practices in both the old and new assessment accountability systems. To fully understand the significance of teachers'

perceptions and practices with the reform, I find it necessary to provide the necessary context of these variables within the old system for comparison. I first turn to the perceptions and practices as they existed under the old system of assessment accountability.

The Old System: Perceptions and Practice

Under the ‘old’ SOL-testing system, accountability was present for the teachers as well as for the students; however, several changes ensued from the legislation. Under the old assessment system there was still the presence of standards to adhere to, and ongoing assessments were administered to measure student proficiency. Based on the lived experiences of teachers, they painted a reality of how the standards were generally taught as isolated facts, to which traditionally-based assessments in their practice mirrored the end-of-year social studies SOL test (i.e., multiple choice). I begin by describing instances in which there was partiality toward the traditional method with SOL testing in place and how this approach impacted the teaching and learning environment.

Upon meeting with the social studies teachers for initial interviews, I inquired how the teachers perceived the ‘old system’ of assessment and accountability. In general, the social studies SOL test had been identified as a multiple-choice, competency test a teacher prepared his or her students to take at the end of the school year. It was Morgan, a 7th grade teacher at Kingsville Middle School, who first described the changes in the social studies SOL test over the years with improvements in rigor:

I think around 2008, that was when they had changed the assessment a little bit, there a little more critical thinking involved in the multiple-choice questions, which to some people sounds funny, but it might mean multi-step questions, so you’re having students make connections within the question in order to arrive at the answer. So, it did become

a little more complicated, compared to what used to be straight-up recall, in my opinion, on the 2001 SOL test.

In terms of practice, Morgan acknowledged the existence of the SOL standards but then shifted the discussion toward her fondness of the content and the curriculum that stemmed from the standards. She expressed how they served as “a nice framework” to guide the social studies classes “so that a whole range of topics from American history get adequate attention and you’re not focusing too much on any one topic.” Returning to the topic of SOL standards, she discussed how the old system did not provide for much depth with these elements. Although she loved the content, she felt pressured to structure her practice on a surface-level because the SOL test was “a lower-level Bloom’s taxonomy type test.” Furthermore, the old system did not allow the students “to show off” their written communication skills, the problem-solving, and critical thinking, which served as skill sets she valued in a 21st century education.

Bob, also a 7th grade teacher at Kingsville Middle School, found the old system to be “competitive,” which was well-suited to this self-confessed element of his character. He commented on how the SOL test rankings were shared at the school level, by teacher, in terms of pass/fail percentages, and the grade level cumulative scores were compared districtwide. As a personal growth measure, he acknowledged a benefit of the SOL test upon stating, “It gave me something to go on and what to teach...so I always used that as a gauge or a score for me.” To obtain such scores, the structure of his practice under the old system was grounded in the standards, to which his [summative] assessments provided “a baseline” to demonstrate “that his kids were learning.” To an extent, this was his mindset in terms of the preparation his students required to later perform with proficiency on the end-of-year SOL test. However, he

acknowledged how this type of practice provided few opportunities for students to receive specific feedback, especially with the SOL test itself which was taken at the end of the year.

There was expressed concern of the memorization of facts and isolated bits of information students were required to master for SOL test day. For instance, Jill (7th grade teacher at Kingsville) how the SOLs felt like “rote memory...here is the list of questions that are possibly on the SOL test, and here is what you have to teach.” In her practice she found the old system to be “very confining” in a manner of teaching to a test, to which planning and instructional delivery fell in line with a similar approach. For example, Jill recalled “trying to cram it [content knowledge] all into two bells of “here are these people, and here’s what they did...remember it.” As a former English teacher, this left little room for her to engage with outside literary resources that would provide the minds-on and hands-on opportunities her students would enjoy to acquire the social studies content.

Steve, a 6th grade teacher at Smithtown Middle School, also discussed his perceptions of the general restrictions in teachers’ practice when it came down to preparing students for their best performance on the SOL test. Reflecting back to what teachers’ practice looked like under the old system, Steve shared the realities of teaching to the test:

You always save those last few weeks to kind of ‘teach to the test’ as much as you can, you’d be foolish not to because obviously you’re going to be judged by that singular test, or 50 questions, that comes at the end of the year. And that’s unfortunate, but it’s what we lived in.

Furthermore, Steve questioned the lifelong skills teachers and students were building “by just being able to remember something on that given day,” which caused concern for long term memory. In hindsight, Steve preferred to have better spent that time implementing meaningful

tasks that incorporated essential skill sets and motivate his students to actively engage with the social studies content. Additionally, managing the dispositions of colleagues across the district during the reform's inception was difficult among those that appeared resistant to the change:

There are still teachers give you the line,... 'We're getting great scores and we're doing great things the old way, but you don't have to reinvent the wheel,' and my philosophy is 'You do' because the old way IS the old way (Steve).

It was after I recognized teachers' interpretations of and response to the old system that I was prompted to disclose my inquiry regarding such circumstances:

Would teachers see a vision for alternative assessment as a "new" approach to old methods of assessment? And if so, where does the evidence of student understanding exist? Is it in the process, the product, possibly both? How are students benefiting from the instruction, the delivery methods, the skills sets they are exposed to, or even the products they are asked to produce? (bridling journal entry, 11-19-15)

Upon commenting on my questions regarding the old system, the teachers emphasized not only what was present in their practice, but also alluded to what was missing (i.e., depth, feedback, student motivation). This served as an indication that the old system was not fulfilling and/or satisfying and left teachers with a sense of longing for the missing elements. When reflecting back on how the teachers described their roles in the classroom, I recognized how the mission behind preparing students for the SOL test was in conflict with their epistemic belief systems/philosophies of teaching and learning.

Introduction to the Reform

Apprehension associated with educational change is not unfamiliar and to be expected. This was particularly the case upon the initial removal of high-stakes tests in Virginia, in conjunction with the assurance of a more purposeful replacement for student learning. The teachers were straightforward upon sharing their initial reactions to the legislation and the uncertainty of “the unknown.” Morgan professed her nervousness, knowing “something else would be added...and you never know if it’s going to be a ‘grass is greener’ type of situation, where you think ‘Oh, there might be something better than the SOLs out there.’” When Jill heard the news, relief was first expressed as, “Oh, the load has been lifted of teaching to the test as much as we have,” followed by appreciation for a more rigorous approach that would challenge her students. Morgan and Bob were both “nervous of the unknown,” especially after knowing what to expect in preparation for an SOL test all these years. Furthermore, while Lisa expressed relief after experiencing years of stress associated with the test, Steve seemed quite pleased that the trend was now moving toward his personal philosophy which favored alternative methods of assessment.

Initial perceptions. Common among the teachers was a belief that trends in education are prevalent and expected to occur in the profession. This was mainly evidenced during the focus group interviews, such as when Steve shared “when we see so many trends in education, they all circle around, maybe alternative assessments will be here to stay for a little bit, and then we go back to standardized tests.” When I asked if the teachers thought this was just going to be “the new flavor of the month,” Steve responded with “I hope not,” to which Deedra and Lisa, also 6th grade teachers at Smithtown Middle School, shared their agreements with “I hope not, too.” Along similar lines of a hopeful future, Morgan expressed confidence that the alternative assessments “aren’t going anywhere.” She explained in the context of a pilot program:

When the SOL test was removed from social studies, I had received the impression, ‘This is where we’re going with education’ so we should have been, basically, the group to watch... and let’s see how this goes in social studies because it’s honestly such a great subject to do this type of assessment with.

Early in the interview process, I asked teachers to share the initial perceptions of the reform in comparison to what they have grown accustomed to under the old system. I immediately realized how shifting from an old standardized system to a new system with alternative assessments brought forth initial questions and concerns regarding the new protocols and procedures in place. For instance, there was expressed concern regarding the coverage of standards on the new PBAs. Whereas the SOL tests “were very strict and very rigid” to which there was vast coverage of standards, Morgan expressed her initial concern of only administering a handful of performance-based assessments during the school year to address a “sprinkling” of the content objectives. She wondered how all the other standards would be assessed, and whether they were as equally important. Similarly, Bob questioned covering the spectrum of curricular standards in that “the SOL tests hit more of the standards and were all-encompassing,” in comparison to the alternative assessments which, in his opinion, seemed “to be hit or miss” and “almost too flexible.” In these two instances, their initial reactions were a result of having grown accustomed to years of practice under the old system while lacking the bigger picture of what was in store through a newly adopted alternative approach.

Overall, teachers understood the state’s intentions to implement the reform. As a result, there was a genuine care for student learning; this element of the reform appeared to be a natural, seamless transition based on their epistemic belief systems of teaching and learning. Seemingly, the transition brought its own unique set of changes into teachers’ practice.

Changes in Practice: Accountability

In several instances, the flexibility that accompanied the assessment reform was welcomed in an effort to enhance the teaching and learning process. In education, “there’s always going to be accountability...it’s never going to go away” according to Steve, but this was not necessarily a bad thing. With regard to student performance, Steve held firm beliefs that “one test should not be the end-all-be-all, and shouldn’t define a student or a teacher for an entire year.” Under the new system, teachers were not only viewed as accountable for providing students with information, but the job more so had become monitoring how students obtained and utilized the information, and to what extent. To aid in this responsibility, Steve relied on several formative measures in his practice to consistently monitor students’ understanding of the content, and “then adjust the lesson based on their knowledge.” In his practice, resources included dry-erase boards for Q&A and pre-assessments, Exit Tickets, and polls using technology. Comparing the old and new systems of assessment, Steve shared how he taught 13 years with an SOL test in place and “was still doing the same things [instruction] and the scores were there.” Throughout his years he learned that “if you’re teaching the content, and you’re covering that content well and they [students] are actually getting it because you do fun, creative performance tasks, they can actually end up doing better.” Steve’s past successes were a result of the accountability he placed on himself to enact a student-centered approach in his practice, which for him, made for a seamless transition to the new accountability system through alternative measures.

Without the SOL test, Jill shared how the state’s reform generated a positive view toward a new sense of accountability. According to her, the new changes had enriched her teaching practice “to open up more possibilities to the students” because it allowed her “to teach in a way

that challenges students to think in a broader perspective.” When I asked how this perspective aligned with “accountability” in her practice, she explained how her students “investigate and look at situations, to question ‘why’ things are happening... [and]...to make connections from history to what they see today.” She provided for me an example of a task she created in the spring of 2015 which involved collaborative research with creating *TIME* magazines for WWI. The students took on certain roles, “whether it be a foreign personal on the field, like an eye-witness on the field or an American correspondent who is here in America telling about the home front.” As a result of the reform, Jill was able to capitalize on the extended pacing schedule and “develop a project with her colleagues.” To further engage in her love for literacy, Jill established an interdisciplinary unit with the English teacher on her grade level. Collaborative planning allowed them to create a web-based, conceptual unit on “warfare” featuring World War II and *The Hobbit*. Through this lens, assessing student proficiency through alternative methods seemed to make sense.

In light of new accountability, Deedra stated “you might now feel a whole lot more accountable.” This realization changed her pedagogical mindset, mainly in the way she planned instructionally. Deedra expressed how she would need to stop and think, ‘Oh man, wow, I need to really think about how I teach my students because if I don’t they won’t be able to answer these questions effectively.” Her mindset shifted into a consistent mode that maintained focus on student performance, as opposed to acquisition of isolated historical facts. In Deedra’s opinion, “The accountability is definitely there because it feels almost as if you’re being graded as a teacher.”

When SOL testing was first implemented, Lisa was not fully prepared for the magnitude in which it would impact her practice. For many years afterward, Lisa did not enjoy the stress of

the accountability (i.e., scores) the test brought into the learning environment. As a result of the reform, the new system has brought with it a sense of open-endedness in her practice, and she compared the accountability her and the students now experienced:

It's been so nice to watch the kids write, to speak, to talk with one another, communicate...other than the drill-and-kill and the time constraints that were on the teachers and the kids, and the pacing, it's all more enjoyable now. And I know the kids have seen a difference, and I know that they enjoy school so much more.

According to Lisa, her classes enjoyed communicating and sharing without pressures of pacing and packing in content. Additionally, she stated "I feel like we're back to education, quality education."

Although research with the students was outside the scope of this study, the teachers shared students' dispositions with respect to the assessments (i.e., PBA vs. SOL). Bob shared how he did not feel that students viewed the alternative assessments as equally important in comparison to the SOL test. He acknowledged how for them "there's not as much stress" which was positive; however, "they don't put as much effort as they should or could to be successful." Morgan expressed how "last year, I don't know that the students felt like the assessment mattered as much as the assessment should have mattered, and I do feel like so much of that is dependent upon the teacher." The degree to which a teacher transitioned students toward the alternative approach mattered, such as discussing the rationale and intended benefits. A common concern among seventh grade teachers was how to convince the students of the assessments' importance when there will no longer be an SOL score mailed home to students/parents at the end of the school year. With little at stake, the extent of students' motives, or drivers, to do their best on the assessments is uncertain and would require future monitoring.

Associated with the new system of alternative assessments was the mentioning of several strengths, particularly as the reform benefitted and enhanced teachers' practice. An enriched teaching and learning climate, for example, resulted from an increase in teachers' creativity, authenticity, and autonomy with lesson planning and instructional delivery. Several teachers professed their initial feelings of "freeness" and "relief" once the pressures associated with the SOL test were alleviated, making room for constructivist practice to progress.

Perceptions of alternative assessment. No longer were teachers preparing students for a content-based, end-of-year assessment. During initial meetings with teachers, I summarized the reform by sharing how we used to have a "one-shot, end-of-year, assessment" which had been replaced by "intermittent, alternative-based assessments." I proceeded to ask for explanation of how the role, or purpose of these assessments, was perceived. Teachers' responses to the implementation of alternative assessments in their practice were similar in nature – to assess students' understanding of content and skills sets through open-ended formats.

Specifically, Bob explained the purpose of adopting such assessments was "to gain knowledge that the student has learned the material" and that they were now reasoning while using social studies skills and life skills to formulate their responses." Furthermore, Jill stated how "their formative nature" provided teachers a chance to gauge how students were doing, "so if we see something early on, that's like a red flag, we can give more focus toward that student, or to make sure that they're getting what they need." In a different view, Jill saw alternative assessments as an opportunity to show students "instead of having multiple-choice...with four possible answers,... look at the breadth, or the broad possibilities of answers." Seemingly, there were different ways to "answer" and demonstrate understanding, such as through a "performance task covering the content," with "higher-order, higher-level Blooms" (Steve). In terms of moving

students beyond mere content knowledge, Deedra exclaimed “When I look at the alternative assessments I think of a skill-set I am teaching my students.” It was not simply selecting a single response, “restate it, and then tell me something more...build upon that.”

The philosophy behind implementing the alternative assessment reform aligned with several teachers’ philosophy of social studies practice. A sense of restoration was expressed on several occasions during teacher interviews. For instance, Steve was pleased with the legislation and professed his love for where the action was headed:

I love sitting in these mandatory meetings and the PLCs and watching the trend turn my way, because I’ve fought it for so long with other teachers and the city, with the SOL test. Standards will always be there, but it’s nice to see the open-mindedness of other ways to assess.

Each teacher’s adaptations to the reform was influenced by his or her epistemic belief system with how students demonstrate knowledge and understanding. After my initial classroom observations I shared how, “I’m starting to see glimpses of how the alternative assessment has granted teachers the ability, or ‘permission,’ to now teach toward their values in the subject of social studies” (bridling journal entry, 11-14-15). In general, if the intentions of the reform were to enrich teachers’ practice with a focus on teaching content knowledge alongside historical skill sets, then assessment through alternative means, the teachers seemed to find this most appropriate. I realized, however, that not all teachers across the district would share a similar mindset.

The Impact of Perceptions on the Discipline

During initial interviews with primary participants, there was concern expressed regarding how their discipline was perceived as a result of the assessment reform. During the

follow up focus group interviews I had requested an update on how they viewed the perceptions of those from outside of their subject/grade area. For starters, Jill expressed the feeling of not being “equal partners with the other core subject areas anymore:

History is such a wonderful subject and we are fortunate that we’re able to emphasize, teach, and reteach, the skills needed for the SOL subjects through our content. Especially the English with the communication skills, interpreting sources, looking for bias, questioning whether it’s a good source or not. But we’re just that extra subject now.

Similar in thought, Morgan was pleased with the support her grade level has provided for English instruction, because “if they’re not successful in their English classrooms, they’re not going to be successful in their social studies classrooms because they’re reading and writing in here too.” However, the expectations of the social studies teachers in terms of measuring students’ success has changed. Morgan raised the point that SOL subject teachers are expected to meet certain benchmarks with their SOL test, and “...nobody says to the social studies teachers, ‘Well, at least these many students need to be hitting a 3 or a 4 on the assessments we’ve put into place.’” In this case, the alternative assessment reform raised concerns regarding the value placed on the discipline.

There was a shared concern among both grade levels that social studies was not as equally valued compared to the past. According to Bob, “it appeared as though the removal of the SOL test would free up teachers’ time to be able to add something new to their plate.” Steve echoed his concern that the removal of the SOL test gave the perception there was less work for the teachers:

I think one perception is, ‘What can we add to our load in terms of teaching?’ and the Achieve 3000 is a great example of, ‘Alright, we’re going to put this on our social studies

teachers now that they don't have the SOL test.' Which I get it, literacy is obviously important in social studies, English and social studies have the task of implementing this literacy practice on the computers.

In the teachers' eyes, there also seemed to be less attention now placed on social studies by the grade level, as demonstrated through various actions from colleagues. As a recent hire to the profession, Deedra shared how she was greeted coming in to the discipline, with 'Oh, you're teaching 6th grade social studies, you're lucky, you're good, you don't have to worry about SOLs so you can do whatever you want,' and that's the perception, that's schoolwide, even districtwide." It was remarked by Jill that with the SOL test in place, "social studies used to be up here [raising her arm], and now it's not and it is a bit of a disappointment." She further commented on the amount of time their PLC had spent crafting quality, common assessments, which, in her opinion, far outweighed what colleagues in other SOL-subject areas had accomplished. As grade level chair, Morgan illustrated the pride she has for the work of her PLC with regard to best teaching practices, and doesn't expect recognition or praise. However, she expressed that since the reform, "we just don't want to feel like we're out in left field, like social studies doesn't matter anymore." Although the social studies assessments were mandated by the state they now had low stakes attached, as they were intended to be used formatively throughout the sequence of teaching and learning. This new concept may have had an impact on the perceptions of those from the outside looking in.

In general, the state's timing of the reform – with introducing students to the alternative, performance-based assessments – was questioned. For instance, Steve shared "if we're just starting this now we've already lost them, they've already developed those habits...If we're starting these skills sets and telling them to think about evidence, we [teachers] should be starting

this sooner in elementary school.” The exact solution to these concerns was apparently unknown; however, small efforts were made to slowly move the students from an old to a new assessment system.

The Test Taking Generation: Breaking the Cycle

For context purposes, I begin this section with the shared experiences at the district-level in their movement beyond the SOLs. The essence of the district’s perspective was focused on social studies practice, with a cohesiveness between historical content and skills. As the Chief Academic Officer speaking on behalf of the division, Dr. Jones acknowledged how a “broader quest to personalization” in education called for a movement toward performance and authentic assessments. This was particularly the case so “that our students have multiple ways of showing mastery.” To that end, the reform with alternative assessment was a main path to travel. In terms of the general feedback received from the district, Dr. Jones shared “...there is very positive feedback with the direction the state is moving.” In fact, there was draft legislation that looked to continue the elimination of select SOL tests “so that the focus is not so heavy on the multiple-choice tests.” Although the SOL tests were removed in only five areas, grades 3 through 7, Dr. Smith discussed the need to provide ongoing preparation and practice for all students. Therefore, his social studies department developed “the K-12 continuum of performance-based assessments” to show yet another avenue of how the district was invested in alternative assessment measures for all students, not just those affected by the reform. This vision was clearly acknowledged with the call for an increased use of balanced assessments in teachers’ practice, which was outlined in Landstone’s Strategic Plan for the next five years.

Generally speaking, teaching to the test has dominated teachers’ practice for years. For instance, Deedra and Steve professed how social studies teachers have grown accustomed to

“just teaching kids to know the information” (Steve) which has now shifted toward teaching them “why you need to know this and how you can apply it” (Deedra). According to Steve, a change in mindset was required upon developing a unit, “It’s not just ‘Alright, let’s get them to learn the facts,’ it’s more about developing broader ideas.”

For the sake of student learning, teachers shared the realization that the reform was needed to keep students on an intended path toward college and career preparedness. They openly expressed how today’s sixth and seventh grade students were still part of the traditional, test-taking generation. They were a product of the SOL-driven, summative mindset to which there is an available answer to every test question and “these are the assessments that matter most.” Although the intentions outlined in the 2014 Virginia legislation called for changes to the look and feel of the assessment process, the 6th and 7th graders had grown accustomed to the SOL-system since third grade, and time would be a critical factor in the attainment of this call.

With regard to the assessment trends within the state educational system, Lisa exclaimed how “we’ve made them test-takers, we’ve created test-takers.” From a teacher and parent perspective she shared how her oldest 16-year-old “was in that group where it all started back in 2nd grade and they were taught how to take that [SOL] test.” Steve further described the challenges associated with changing students’ mindsets from the old system toward acceptance of and comfort with the new system:

I think we’re trying to change the perception of a test-taking kid that’s used to the summative test....“Here’s the information.” And now I’m going to assess through either a performance task or an alternative assessment from the city. Yes, I think we need to change what they are used to.

Deedra further described the circumstances, in that “they [students] were still coming off the old test, so when giving them a performance-based task, my students were like “What is this?” “This is an assessment?” It was understood that building students’ capacity with the skill sets required for the alternative assessments was going to take patience, and above all, time. Lisa stated with regard to her 6th graders, “These are still those kids that we’ve made into test-takers, that don’t know how to take evidence and read it and put in into a paragraph...it’s foreign to them.”

In that light, my personal inquiry served as a driver throughout the data collection and analysis phases: “In what ways might the phenomenon [enactment of the alternative assessment] be enhanced or hindered at the classroom level?” (bridling journal entry, 11-08-15). In the following section I share the intentionality of both groups to address their concerns through the initial steps of active response. As a result of the district leaders’ and teachers’ understanding of the circumstances surrounding today’s test-taking student, initial interventions were enacted to address the situation.

Taking Initiative: First Steps of Pedagogical Action

As a starting initiative, the sixth and seventh grade teachers turned toward one another to communicate and collaborate within the space of their professional learning communities (PLCs). The professional work conducted within the PLCs was lauded amongst its members on both grade levels. Carrying out the duties and responsibilities bestowed upon them by the reform was more palatable when there is presence of genuine respect and common appreciation for shared practices.

During the interview process I discovered teachers’ use of summative, multiple-choice tests had not entirely gone to the wayside. As in previous years, both grades continued to rely on

multiple-choice tests to measure student proficiency of a unit's content, even though the reform was intended to foster an increase in alternative classroom practices. However, after the reform was enacted in 2015, there was a concerted effort amongst the grade levels to incorporate open-ended questions on quizzes and tests that mirrored those featured on the district's PBAs. Specifically, this intervention included opportunities for student application of content understanding in accompaniment with higher-level, historical thinking skills (i.e., critical thinking, communication, corroboration, etc...).

Sixth grade communication and collaboration. Although this was the first full year the sixth grade teachers worked together as colleagues, the dynamics of their work ethic were strong. According to Deedra, as the newest member to the team:

My colleagues are wonderful. At our PLCs we talk about the different lessons coming up, the curriculum and what worked last year and what didn't work, what we'd like to change, and even different ideas that they come up with.

Steve acknowledged how they made it a point to meet every week to discuss important matters, such as planning, student achievement, and assessment.

In response to the reform, the sixth grade teachers generated essay questions for their unit tests while working in their PLC. According to Lisa, the grade level chair, "We give a unit test but that's a basic test. They're multiple-choice, fill-in-the blank, matching, and then we have added an essay at the end to wrap up the unit." Students were required to write "a nice, healthy paragraph" to elaborate on their historical understanding. Lisa further explained how each teacher could design different essay questions based on students' readiness levels with their writing:

As far as making our essay questions for the unit test, because sometimes we gauged them way too high...so after reading what they could write, what they understood and could handle, we scaled them either up or down according to levels. For each of my classes I did a different essay... it was differentiated to the ability of that class and where I thought they would be able to answer it.

Lisa further supported the grade level's actions to take a new approach with summative assessments. Candidly, she expressed "with multiple-choice testing...I think in a good way we're kind of getting away from that."

Steve, in his second year on the 6th grade team, followed through with the grade level's initial decision to maintain multiple-choice testing. He described a typical 6th grade unit test as having "50 or 60 questions, multiple choice, maybe a couple of essay, and really just covers that content and its pre-qualified by a study guide." He portrayed this as typical, or traditional, practice in that "it's pretty much what we've always done." Additionally, he acknowledged how "some summative, quizzes have not gone away," and unit tests are pretty much still required" of the grade level by administration (Steve). On several occasions, Steve expressed his personal preference for students to demonstrate their understandings through formats that do not require selecting a letter, as he didn't perceive this as a means of ensuring the quality of student understanding.

It was Deedra who shared a disciplinary outlook regarding the refinements made to the grade level's unit tests:

We had a short answer at the very end of it, because that literacy piece is always important, not just the multiple-choice. And I did a lot of writing [feedback] on that thing [the test] because my students had to give three reasons and some of their reasons were

just based on their own opinion versus facts. I think it's the first time my students have had to really demonstrate that skill [rationalize/justify].

Deedra agreed with “getting away from the multiple-choice, because to me that's just regurgitating the information.” By adding this element to the test, there was no possibility for a student to choose a letter or make a lucky guess. In terms of results, she explained how “if they didn't know that [objective], it shows,” which served as a greater and more accurate indicator of student proficiency.

Seventh grade communication and collaboration. The level of professionalism and respect amongst the seventh grade PLC was a significant contributor toward their ability to accomplish established goals. According to Bob, “we all respect each other, so it's a lot easier to work together when everyone carries their load.” Jill and Morgan have been working in social studies together for nine years, however, it's the second year for all three members together.

The grade level chair of seventh grade teachers, Morgan, also acknowledged their use of end-of-unit summative tests, and their initiatives to incorporate “a mix of multiple-choice with partial-construction response.” She described the construction process of the unit tests as a collaborative effort by the grade level:

We take the objectives, and each objective is listed next to the question. We create questions for each objective, with graphics. The multiple-choice part of the test is very much based on what we would have seen on the SOLs as far as the graphic types of questions. So we use political cartoons or quotes.

Like sixth grade, seventh grade incorporated a constructed response section to their tests. During construction they “make sure it [the test] aligns with the objectives” (Jill). Bob described their intentionality to incorporate different writing formats with each unit test, “anywhere from a

formal writing, to a postcard, to a very long writing in WWII to describe the Holocaust.” The purpose for implementing the writing has been “to help the literacy strategies with our English colleagues” (Jill). In further support, the PLC developed The Writer’s Checklist (see Figure 5.1) to accompany the constructed response portion of a unit test, to emphasize: usage of the correct tenses, capitalization and vocabulary, opening/closing, sentences, and the conscious use of perspective writing. The development and enactment of this resource as “a tool” was an intentional effort by the grade level to not only support their English colleagues but to demonstrate the value of producing literate students.

Figure 5.1 The Writer’s Checklist for Seventh Grade Summative Assessments

A writer’s checklist to help you:

- ☐ The writer uses appropriate opening and closing sentences.
- ☐ The writer uses the correct tense.
- ☐ The writer communicates from the correct point of view.
- ☐ The response includes complete sentences.
- ☐ Spelling and grammar errors do not take away from the reader’s understanding of the response.

To maximize student learning potential and motivation, forward thinking toward performance tasks was discussed by several teachers. Lisa discussed the possibility in the future “to just use that [district alternative assessment] as our grade instead of a unit test, because there’s no need to do both.” In this case, the alternative assessments were viewed as a complimentary means to the grade level’s practices, versus a forced fit. Bob additionally expressed hopes “that at one point we’ll get to a level where we can use them [alternative assessments] as part of a formal assessment, part of our test could be made up of these assessments where we could tie them together.”

The District’s Action Plan

Upon meeting with district leaders, those of whom were tasked with overseeing the legislation mandates at the district level, Landstone's Strategic Plan goals became a focal point of the discussion. The division's plan aligned with the reform, even before it was enacted, based on the district's progression with performance-based measures that were essential to a balanced system of assessments (Abbott, 2015). Revisited from the previous study (Abbott, 2015) was discussion of goals outlined in the district's action plan to implement the reform: (1) to recognize teachers' readiness with implementing the reform with fidelity, and (2) to structure a support system that would meet teachers' short term and long term needs (i.e., professional development, literacy training, classroom resources, etc...). In consideration of how teachers viewed accountability, Dr. Jones discussed the district's vision to move teachers and students away from a content-oriented social studies practice and toward incorporating essential disciplinary skill sets:

The Strategic Plan guides us towards thinking about having students master not only the content but globally competitive skills, and how are we measuring mastery on those along the way and helping students work towards mastery.

In this regard, teacher participants and district leaders were in the midst of establishing a shared vision with respect to the pathways of alternative assessment. Albeit, the intended outcomes were largely dependent upon the pedagogical decisions teachers made within their respective classrooms.

Early in the interview, I asked about the timeline for the 2015-2016 school year – the steps involved with putting the alternative assessments in place and making sure that they were in the hands of the teachers – in comparison to the 2014-2015 trial year. Dr. Smith, Secondary Director of Teaching and Learning, expressed how the timeline was “much cleaner this year.”

Dr. Jones, the division's Chief Academic Officer, supported this by sharing the department's efforts with "some tweaking and fine-tuning in place" mainly to heighten teachers' abilities and comfort with the tasks. In preparation for the 2015-2016 school year, Ms. Pratt, the Secondary Social Studies Coordinator, made minor adjustments with the alternative assessment tasks. Refinements were based on social studies teachers' reported sampling of student responses (i.e., "highs, mediums, and lows") and input on the primary secondary sources embedded in the tasks, such as the need for "a better map." However, Ms. Pratt called attention to the updated changes in the social studies state standards made in 2015, and expressed hesitancy to "make a lot of changes...we wanted to see what those [standards] were before we made any big changes in the assessments."

Development of a Plan. The leaders' ultimate goal was to develop a cohesiveness between what was legislatively mandated by the state and what was outlined in the division's Strategic Plan, which included engaging students in "globally competitive skills" (i.e., 21st century problem-solving, critical thinking, communication). Dr. Smith explained the importance of the social studies content, "but the skill sets are as equally important and we need to know how to gauge that." While some teachers may have considered the removal of accountability associated with the reform, an added layer of accountability for teachers to be reflective in their practice while working students toward mastery of content and skills was highlighted:

So if kids scored poorly on an end-of-course test (i.e., SOL), you're not compelled to reteach to mastery. So in this case I think teachers are getting information along the way that may indicate students aren't there, and so I think they're being held more accountable throughout the learning process to individualize student performance along the way (Dr. Jones).

Enhancing the district's action plan to meet the state's reform mandates included measures to provide feedback for students. In order to measure how well students were progressing with 21st century skills, Dr. Jones announced the intention to "provide feedback to kids on where they are on the continuum with communicating, problem-solving, and thinking critically so that we're not solely focused on the mastery of content." To that end, action was required to increase the focus on (a) the design of skills set rubrics, and (b) engagement with scoring methods. Although the district already had criterion rubrics in place to accompany their performance-based assessments, it was questioned "Are they the best rubrics?" How should the scoring work? And, how do we really practice that?" (Dr. Smith). Moving forward, the collaborative, regional work on the horizon was intended to serve as a space for professional growth and fine-tuning of these practices.

Working across levels: Macrosystem, exosystem, and microsystem. Since the inception of the alternative assessment reform in 2014, open lines of communication and bridges of support have been established between the state (macrosystem), regional districts (exosystems), and their respective schools (microsystems). During the interview with district leaders it was shared that the 2014-2015 Region II grant, provided for professional training and collaboration amongst its 15 school districts, had been extended throughout the 2015-2016 school year. Administrators, district coordinators and teacher representatives were invited to participate in the regional meetings. As an extension of the district's work conducted during 2014-2015 school year, Dr. Smith discussed how "this year we'll focus on rubric development across the region to match what we've done because that's one area we need to strengthen." The rubrics were aligned with content mastery and globally competitive skills sets (i.e., problem-solving, critical thinking, communication) to offer feedback for students. Dr. Jones and Dr.

Smith explained how Landstone's work with performance-based assessments was featured as exemplars at the state level, and their work within the region had been held in high regard. This was partially a result of the district's available staffing and resources to produce quality assessments.

The next hurdle to overcome was heightening teachers' awareness of what proficiency of critical thinking, problem-solving, written communication, etc., looked like within an alternative assessment context. The district leaders acknowledged this aim as "ongoing" with regard to strengthening teacher practice and that every effort would be explored to bring this to fruition, mainly through the means of professional development.

Establishing Common Ground through Support: Teachers as Participants

In this next finding I focus on the intentions behind each of the district's supportive interventions to effectively implement the assessment reform, accompanied by teachers' perceptions of and participation in these supports. Specifically, I capitalize on the establishment of a common ground struck between teachers and district leaders as collaborators, which became essential to the phenomenon. In detail, I feature modalities of communication and collaboration enacted across the district (exosystem), and classroom (microsystem) layers of the Educational Environments theoretical model which provide for the transfer of responsibilities amongst vested stakeholders carrying out the state's legislative reform.

My inquiry regarding the communication and collaboration among the educational environments was reflected early in the data collection process upon expressing: "To what extent do communication and collaboration between the levels (state, district, and classroom) play a role in the implementation of these assessments?" (bridling journal entry, (11-08-15). In the

subsequent sections I describe how the concerted efforts and initiatives were carried out through supportive interventions, with teachers serving as participants in each support.

Professional Development: As the Main Support

The most effective intervention of professional development served as the foundation, or the main support, from which the division leaders' action plan was built. In light of the new accountability system, assessment and instruction were perceived as interrelated and were to be practiced through a cyclical manner. Specifically, active participation in the district's vision for the reform called for teachers to engage in new protocols – collecting, scoring, analyzing, and reporting student data – to further reinforce ongoing, formative practice with instruction and assessment.

Planning for and navigating through the unfamiliar territory of alternative assessment accountability required specific actions to address the anticipated needs of teachers. For starters, managing the logistics of the assessments, from administering the tasks to analyzing the data, was a top concern and priority. Upon meeting with leaders at the district level, Dr. Jones discussed the initial considerations based on his observations of, and discussions with, those affected by the alternative assessment reform:

I think teachers were pleased with the change, but there is work involved with learning a new way of doing something. I think some of the initial responses were concern and worry about how there will be record-keeping, tracking, scoring, time for scoring, inter-rater reliability.

Dr. Jones further clarified the intention was not to create an “overwhelming sense of an assessment where it becomes “this three-day task all of the sudden that monopolizes [teachers’] time.” They were intended to become essential components of the formative assessment cycle

“that teachers can get through from time-to-time, through a performance-based assessment pretty quickly.” Although the language of formative practice was not new in the district’s educator training, the cyclical nature of assessment and instruction required adopting a new mindset.

Mandatory professional development training was held during summer 2015 to fully inform and prepare sixth and seventh grade social studies teachers for the new accountability system. According to Dr. Smith, the two-hour session informed teachers “how to incorporate the five different performance-based assessments” into their practice throughout the school year. This training served as a part of the year-round professional training the district required with a focus on “balanced assessment.” Reflecting back on the summer training, Morgan described her experience sitting with a small group of colleagues as they looked at and discussed all the different 6th and 7th grade tasks. She shared, “We were discussing some things to change, to tweak, and to make the process easier.” To further describe the experience, Bob shared details from the pilot year (i.e., spring 2015) in comparison to the training he received to prepare him for the 2015-2016 school year:

We were looking at the ones we had used in last spring, and just discussing the strong pieces, and ways we could prepare students to be able to take that assessment, and what that meant to be an alternative assessment. That was kind of good because in the spring we hadn’t received it [training].

These collaborative procedures were perceived as helpful, particularly as they prepared teachers to later analyze their students’ tasks at their respective schools. In a later section I describe the protocol in which the 6th/7th grade teachers engaged in their analysis of students’ assessments during their PLC sessions.

As a result of the summer training session, Steve's reflection was most positive as he shared how, "What I'm taking from these meetings is, the city is finally coming around...it was nice because I could see that they are finally moving toward a way I've always taught, which is through alternative assessments and performance tasks." The district's follow-up communication after the training further encouraged teachers to expand their practice with performance-based tasks, asking teachers, "What have you been making?" and "Are you sharing your work?" (Steve). As a result, Steve took action and intentionally shared his work electronically with his fellow colleagues at the school and district level with hopes to further promote the essence of the reform as it impacted teachers' classroom practice.

The professional development training further inspired Jill in particular to alter her practice to reflect the reform. For instance, to expand her knowledge of best practices, Jill shared her experience completing a district workshop training last year on using primary sources. According to her, "That really sparked something in me that in this past year I've tried to implement quite a bit...just using the resources that I didn't even know we had, like the Library of Congress, it's amazing!" Specifically, it was during the training that Jill was introduced to the rich, historical resources featured on the Stanford History Group website (i.e., primary and secondary sources) which became a turning point in her practice. In light of the reform, she managed to establish constructivist motives that enriched her lessons and incorporated the rigor and authenticity she felt her gifted population (in particular) needed.

The more time I spent with the teachers' the further I realized how continual collaboration for professional growth was an essential element to the work conducted within the professional learning communities (PLCs). The remaining sections of this finding are significant in this regard as they directly address the phenomenon of this study. Mainly, I feature teachers'

successes as participants in the supports of the district, working through the implementation of the alternative assessments.

Unpacking the Alternative Assessments

Through attending the mandatory professional development provided by district leaders, the 6th/7th grade social studies teachers were not only made aware of the content and skills sets embedded in the PBAs, but also the level to which students were expected to perform. Prior to administering the first assessment of the school year, I asked the teachers to share their perceptions of the implementation process. After they received the district's support and guidance, seventh grade teachers in particular expressed confidence in the preparation of their students, even if the first assessment was perceived as "the most challenging" due to its length and depth of analysis with multiple primary source documents.

While meeting with the seventh grade teachers during a focus group interview, Morgan, and Jill described the essential preparation in their practice through authentic social studies resources (i.e., primary source documents) and historical thinking skills (i.e., corroboration, contextualization) they had provided for students leading up to this point. Morgan's confidence in her students' ability to successfully perform was conveyed:

While I'm nervous about the size of this particular assessment, I feel pretty good about it because the format is something we've done together as historical thinking skills, so it won't be the first time these students received these types of questions. I would like to think that this will provide a good base level for us to then see growth as we move forward with future assessments throughout the year.

It was Jill who acknowledged the assessment's sophisticated format upon stating, "I feel pretty confident about the work we've been doing with our students, day-in-and-day-out, and displayed

confidence when sharing “the foundation has been laid for the most part” to successfully prepare students for the first upcoming alternative assessment. This preparation was confirmed upon observing Jill and Morgan in their practice, to which there was consistent active learning taking place through document-based questions and higher-order thinking that stretched students’ thinking beyond memorization of historical facts.

Bob, on the other hand, expressed both apprehension and confidence prior to administering the first alternative assessment of the school year. He candidly shared, “I’m still a little uneasy until they take it with how they’re going to do, and how they’ll feel about it because you’re dealing with 11, 12, 13 year-olds,” implying that students in this middle age are sometimes unpredictable. His reservations also stemmed from not knowing how seriously the students were going to perceive this assessment. However, Bob expressed confidence in his daily teaching with respect to the types of lessons he planned to address his students’ readiness and felt confident in knowing “where they can perform at.” In other words, it was the day-to-day practice Bob found most beneficial to recognize his students’ levels with content understanding and various skills sets. Notably, this was the type of formative practice intended, as outlined in the legislation. Overall, Bob knew his students well and had assumed they would perform successfully.

Degree of rigor. The alternative assessments were designed with 21st century skills sets embedded, to reinforce the essential skills of critical thinking, problem-solving, and effective communication. It was during the interview process I invited teachers to describe the district-generated assessments in terms of their level of challenge. The seventh grade teachers described a higher degree of rigor with their assessments in comparison to the sixth grade teachers. For instance, one of the tasks required analysis of separate primary sources that would best a given

historical situation. With that, Morgan proclaimed one of the greatest strengths of the assessments was the call for rationale:

Higher-level thinking and justification were required, as the students had to say not only why they picked the source they picked, but also why they didn't pick the other sources.

A student could perform well on the first part but poorly on the second, or vice versa.

Embedded in the assessments were sequencing questions, accompanied by primary source documents, which required students' application of conceptual and historical understanding with key events. Upon assessing this understanding, "If they [students] got the two sources out of order, they couldn't go any further in their score...you have to hit this benchmark or else you really earned no points at all...which is not a bad thing" (Morgan). Jill also perceived this as a particular benefit to the alternative assessments, in that "even if they picked the wrong choice [document] they reasoned why they picked their choice, pretty strongly...they were at least thinking and not guessing...So I liked that part." Nonetheless, significant to a student's ability to reason or sequence was a critical understanding of historical content and events as they impact the context of one another.

Conversely, sixth grade teachers held a slightly different perspective regarding their first PBA. Steve described the assessment as requiring "two-step processing, maybe three if you're lucky," expressing his desire for a greater degree of challenge. Although the sixth grade teachers expressed approval of the direction the state had taken, the first assessment of the 2015-2016 school year was in need of some refinement to enhance the level of rigor. Lisa, who served as a member of the development committee that created the assessments, stated how "some were harder than others," with respect to the degree of sophistication across all assessments. However, she also acknowledged how the sixth grade students "aren't used to taking assessments

like that...they're not really comfortable yet, but they're getting there." As a result, viewing the assessments with ascending intellectual demand over time made sense, as "it's going to take a while to get them more comfortable with the writing, the reading, and the strategies" (Deedra).

Since the beginning of the year, the grade levels used their PLC gathering time to discuss the disciplinary literacy strategies and historical thinking skills students would need to be successful on the alternative assessments. In a later section I further discuss in detail the collaborative tasks that served as products from the PLC sessions that specifically addressed this agenda.

Administering the Alternative Assessments

A renewed sense of autonomy with scheduling and administering assessments enabled the teachers to make informed decisions that aligned best with their instructional goals (i.e., planning and delivery). Without the need to coordinate or align the assessment with a specific date, a teacher had autonomy to administer the assessment in his or her classroom when the students appeared ready. This protocol was purposefully designed with a window of flexibility, to which a teacher used his or her discretion to assess when it was appropriate. On that note, Deedra shared, "If they had said, 'Hey, you need to give it on this day' ...and I've already moved on to another topic then it doesn't really tie into my lesson." Deedra expressed her appreciation for the flexibility, stating how "it was perfect as we finished up the unit, ...it was really a good opportunity to go ahead and do it [assessment] before we move on to Colonial America, and it was great in terms of setting them [students] up for the unit test." Similarly, Bob shared how he "can place it [the assessment] in where it needs to go." Furthermore, he was pleased with the convenience:

They're already created, they've done the rubrics for you, it's just a matter of grading them and judging them...so, in a way, I guess it has made life easier for me if it's given to me at the right time.

Without provisions of specific guidelines, teachers gained the flexibility and autonomy to individualize the process of administering the assessments. Although the grade level teachers ended up administering their alternative assessments within the same week of one another, there were different approaches amongst the teachers' delivery. I was fortunate to observe the alternative assessments being administered in multiple classrooms. Prior to my observations, I addressed the phenomenon in a journal entry, sharing my anticipations regarding the implementation process:

I realize a key factor in this process is the level of importance a teacher places on preparation for these assessments....In some cases, it may be simply checking the box, in others, this assessment may be approached with fidelity to which the students will be assessed formatively with the results used to design future instruction. (bridling journal entry, 11-08-15)

In the following section I reflect on one sixth and one seventh grade experience, each in turn, while presenting the highlights from each experience.

Sixth grade. When I arrived first thing on Monday morning at 8:55 AM, two of the sixth grade teachers happened to be administering the assessments on the same day. Entering Steve's classroom first, I found the alternative assessments waiting for students on their desks. Clear instructions on how to get started were provided on the Smartboard, with a message stating, "Take your time and try your best!" Students entered the room, recognized the task was on "Today's Agenda," and immediately settled and began working. The assessment was on

European exploration, to which the students were asked to determine analyze a primary source document (i.e., a picture) and determine whether the Spanish were friends or foe to the American Indians. They were to explain their response to this single question on a single page. At one point a student raised his hand and whispered, “Can I pick both?” to which Steve responded best with, “They’re asking you to pick one or the other, so you decide.” Students worked quietly and intently, and when finished turned in the assessment before beginning another independent task. All students were finished within 15 to 25 minutes. During our follow-up discussion I inquired about the decision-making process regarding “when” and “how” to administer the district-generated, performance-based assessments. Steve knew his students were ready for this assessment based on the content and skill sets previously reviewed and assessed in class. He further responded with, “I think that’s the good part about alternative-based assessments in general” because there was the element of open-endedness. He appreciated not having a required date, which opened up new possibilities regarding how to best administer the assessment with his students:

My goal is to use it [the PBA] as a ‘Bell Ringer.’ I just feel like it might be easier and maybe get better results if it’s the first thing they’re working on when they come in to class...I think that you need flexibility as a teacher.

Next, I traveled down the hall to observe Lisa’s class already engaged in the alternative assessment. Upon entering the classroom she had passed out the assessment and was currently giving directions on how students should use their highlighters as a tool to read through the task, then create a graphic organizer on their loose-leaf piece of paper to record everything they knew about the topic of the historical topic. She announced, “I will collect your planning sheet with your assessment.” Glancing at several students papers, I saw Venn diagrams and two-column

note-taking. Lisa later explained this was her way of having students pull out key information and use their organizer as a pre-writing tool. The students worked quietly, appeared fully engaged in the task, and finished within the next 35 minutes. In comparison to Steve's classroom, I recognized Lisa's more structured approach to the assessment was timely. In my bridling journal I disclosed how this may have been a result of many variables, such as the students' readiness levels with the content and skills, students' need for scaffolding, and/or the teachers' views of the implementation process as a whole.

Seventh grade. Whereas the sixth grade teachers chose different implementation approaches with the assessments, the seventh grade teachers had agreed to engage in the same protocol. The details for administering the assessments were previously arranged and agreed upon during a PLC session. Because the teachers used the same protocol, I chose Bob to serve as a representative example.

Arriving at Bob's classroom at noon on a Monday, there was a detailed agenda waiting for students at the board. When the class was settled, Bob began by explaining the reform and how the removal of the SOL test now called for a replacement with a performance-based assessment, to which there will be several taken during the school year. He proceeded to explain the need for critical thinking on this assessment of Westward Expansion, and explained how "...this is not like the SOL where there is just one answer, there can be more than one correct response." While passing out the assessment materials he continued to explain, "...when you receive this you might feel overwhelmed by its size, but I'm sure after we take a look through this you'll feel more comfortable." Bob proceeded to read through the five-page booklet, to which there were five primary source documents, sources A through E. "These are the ones you'll be using, there are three questions to answer" (Bob). On the back, was the rubric which

the class took time to look over together. Students worked quietly and appeared engaged, and most students finished between 20 and 40 minutes with varying amounts of writing provided in their responses. During a follow-up conversation, Bob explained how the 15 minutes of “preparation” time was necessary to best prepare his students, academically and emotionally. He shared that several students later expressed concern as to whether or not the assessment was a “test” or “for a grade.”

Overall, the assessments varied in length and levels of rigor. The amount of time and attention paid toward the assessments was dependent upon how involved the assessment was, such as with the amount of questions or primary source documents, or which class/grade I was observing. This may have been one of the many considerations of the PBAs at the district level upon their construction.

District perspective. From the district’s perspective on implementation, there was a great deal of purposeful decision-making intended to be made on teachers’ end, based on what was perceived as “best for students.” Ms. Pratt expressed how “with the performance tasks that we have now, they’re given the option to kind of chunk them up anyway” which may become the case when an assessment is “fairly lengthy.” Therefore, “some teachers, based on their students, maybe gave them [students] part of the assessment during one class period, and at another time gave them the next part of it” (Ms. Pratt). This option may have been convenient for the seventh grade teachers who were on 50-minute bell schedule, versus the sixth grade teachers who had 90-minute blocks of time.

Further discussion revealed the district’s stance on reinforcing both historical content and skill sets through the developed alternative assessments. According to Dr. Jones, “That’s something we’ve had a lot of discussion about” and remained aware that even though “many of

these tasks, or authentic assessments, call on kids to engage in these process-skills beyond knowing the content, ...communicating, collaborating, problem-solving, thinking critically..., we're not always providing rubrics specific to looking at those.” Although these globally competitive skills were encouraged in the learning environment they were not qualitatively assessed, leaving students without the provision of feedback on their progression. However, supplemental means to support the content alongside these skills sets were introduced through an enhanced focus on literacy.

Literacy: Interdisciplinary Support

The promotion of literacy across the social studies curriculum served as an interdisciplinary approach. Mainly, this initiative was intended to enrich teachers' social studies practice with the content delivery while developing the disciplinary skill sets of reading comprehension, critical thinking, analysis, and communication. As another main support to accompany the implementation of the alternative assessments, the Achieve 3000 software program was purchased through the district and enacted across the sixth and seventh grade levels. The logistics of how to navigate through the software program and engage students was shared during teachers' professional development training.

It was from the grade level chair of 7th grade, Morgan, I learned “Achieve 3000 is a program that [the district] has decided to implement in English and social studies classes, grades 6-12.” During each Achieve 3000 lesson, students worked independently in the software system on a leveled reading assignment based on their assessed reading level, or Lexile score. Students would read an article, then proceed to work through a series of comprehensive questions. The skill sets of compare/contrast, analysis using charts and graphs, and written communication, were reinforced, all while a student worked at a self-designated pace.

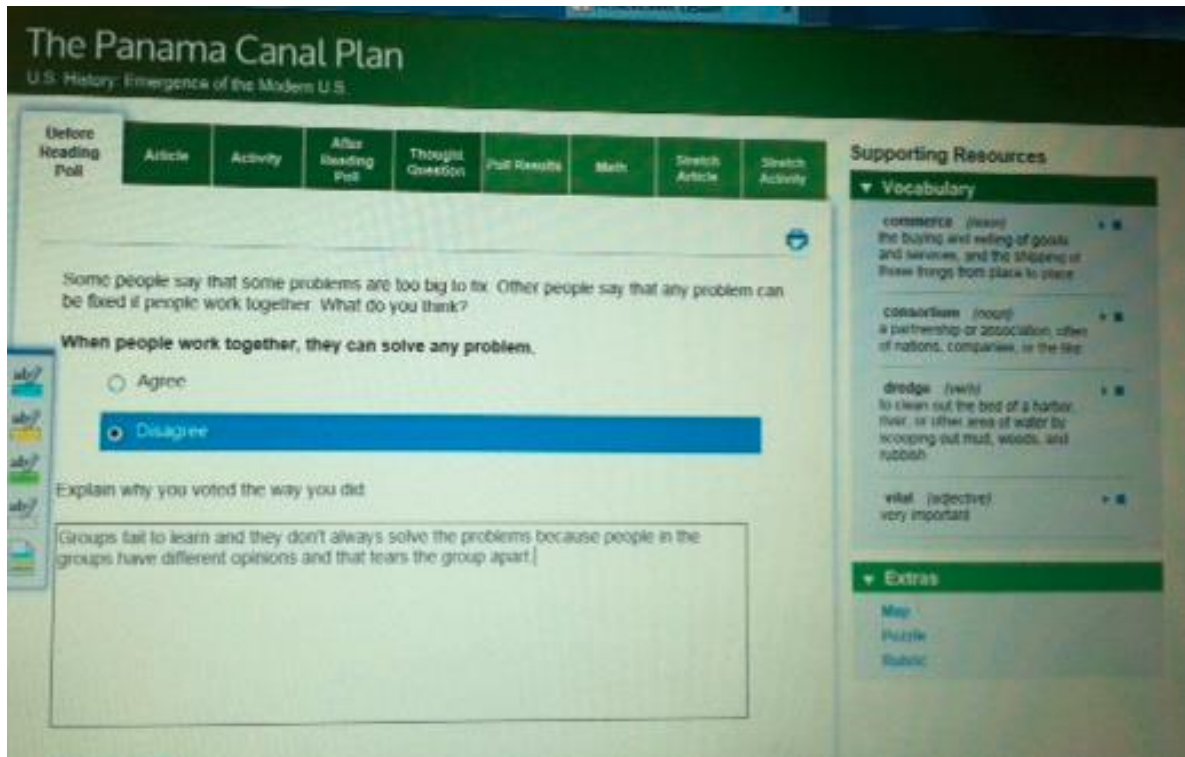
After meeting with the teachers and observing their practice, I learned that seventh grade social studies teachers engaged students in Achieve 3000 lessons every Monday, while sixth grade social studies teachers conducted an Achieve 3000 lesson once every other week. It was explained to me that the articles in Achieve 3000 were part of the curriculum provided by the company, and had been matched with the social studies standards as an appropriate fit for each unit of study. Although the articles were pre-selected for the teachers to accompany their social studies curriculum, teachers had discretion to go into the Achieve database and select a similar article on a topic that better aligned with the unit of study, or was better suited to meet students' needs. I had the opportunity to visit several classrooms to observe Achieve 3000 in action amongst teachers and students.

While visiting Morgan's 7th grade classroom I observed students engaged in an Achieve 3000 lesson based on the topic of the Panama Canal, to which students were responding to a series of multiple choice and (mainly) open-response questions, as demonstrated in Figure 5.2. During the follow-up interview, Morgan described an essential benefit to the program that provided for differentiated instruction to meet various levels of student readiness:

The primary goal on Mondays when we do Achieve 3000 is for the students to improve their literacy skills. The way I word their Learning Target every week is "Improve your reading ability" just to keep it in kid-friendly terms but we're really trying to improve their Lexile levels, based on non-fiction reading, related to what we're learning in social studies.

One section in particular, Dig Deeper, was intended for use as an extension of thinking to offer additional rigor. Morgan noted, "I really wanted them to take the Dig Deeper section seriously because that would have been a nice link to what we'd be doing the following day studying the

Figure 5.2 Achieve 3000 Panama Canal Lesson



Panama Canal.” Naturally, students required different amounts of time to complete the Achieve 3000 lesson, depending on how efficient of a reader they were or how quickly they completed the parts of the lesson. For management purposes, Morgan had an independent Cause and Effect Mosaic activity ready for students upon completion of Achieve, to which they needed to demonstrate understanding of seven Philippine-American War events through pictures. Each piece was to be clearly labeled as a “cause” or an “effect.” This task further promoted the “cause and effect” skill set featured in Achieve 3000, meanwhile, offering students a method to communicate their content understanding through a more creative outlet.

An observation in Lisa’s 6th grade classroom opened my eyes to the outside literacy strategies that could be incorporated to compliment the Achieve 3000 lesson. Although the computer-based lesson opened with a “debatable question” for each student’s independent response, Lisa chose to feature this question on an Entry Ticket at the start of class. The question

was “Should we always try to answer questions from the past even if it takes a lot of time and money?” While students crafted their responses, I observed Lisa walking around to prompt deeper thinking with questions such as, “Why do you think that is?” and “How might others interpret this?” especially if they finished early. The majority of students had the front and back of their half-page ticket filled with writing in response to the question and waited patiently with hands raised to share their response out loud with the class. I viewed this as an enriching opportunity for students to work on their construction of an analytical response through written and oral communication, prior to engaging in their featured Achieve task on “Drake’s Secret.” Upon meeting with Lisa during the post-interview she expressed the grade level’s support for Achieve 3000: “I can see a difference in the kids from the Achieve 3000 with the literacy components...This year I’ve been amazed...they knew where to find information, and they’re reading and pulling it out on their own.” Looking at students’ scores on Achieve 3000, the data shared a great deal about what they are able to pull out of a reading passage and answer correctly, in addition to understanding what they read, not just “Here are the facts” or “Here are the answers.” Lisa’s response indicated her students’ growth with reading comprehension, which would benefit students in all content areas, not just social studies and English.

In comparison, I observed Deedra’s 6th grade class engaged in an Achieve 3000 lesson during the same unit of study, geared toward the topic of Ancient African Empires. Deedra explained how she was further ahead in her pacing compared to her social studies colleagues, therefore; she used the opportunity to engage students in an enrichment Achieve 3000 lesson on a topic that she felt would captivate their interests. During our post-observation interview, Deedra further discussed the benefits of the program and how it is teaching students how to “take down the key points” and determine: “What are the main ideas?” “Why is this important?” and

“How do you infer something from what they [authors] just said to come up with another conclusion?” She further explained how these skills translated into the tasks sixth grade teachers enact with their students throughout the school year, such as with research projects, Cornell note-taking, and persuasive debates, to name a few.

Supporting literacy through the means of Achieve 3000 was generally perceived as a positive element added to teachers’ practice. However, there was concern for future fatigue, in that the possibilities of having too much of a good thing could resort in a loss of value. For instance, Lisa stated “I already do two a month and English does two, so they’re doing it 4 times...a little bit of burnout might happen.” Morgan echoed this concern with “We’re doing them in the social studies classes on Monday...in the Science classes on Wednesday, and then in English classes on Friday.” Additionally, Bob shared how “it could almost wear them down” and stifle the excitement to get on the computers. Expressed during the focus group interview, the extent to which Achieve 3000 will effectively be used in the future will need monitoring, for the reasons previously expressed. Nonetheless, the teachers’ professed support for literacy will continue through their implementation of various reading and writing tasks, planned for and developed during PLC sessions since the reform was enacted.

The Scoring Protocol: Alternative Assessments

Engagement in the protocol for analyzing and scoring the alternative assessments called for the gathering of colleagues in their professional learning communities (PLCs) for purposeful communication and collaboration. During the mandatory professional development sessions in summer 2015, the protocol for analyzing a sampling of students’ assessments was modeled, using criterion rubrics to determine trends in areas of strength and those in need of improvement. This type of professional collaboration was highly encouraged for the purposes of providing

practice and growth in data-informed decision making. Significant to the protocol was the culminating task that called for discussion of interventions for future practice in the form of “action,” or next steps. Charged with overseeing the summer’s professional development, Dr. Smith described how there was a large portion of accountability within each school to gauge students’ progress and report that progress to the district level:

The expectation is that some use it for a growth measure, and that the schools send us low, middle, and high examples from each grade level or on each assessment so that we can see and hear what it’s looking like from school-to-school.

From this angle, Dr. Smith felt it was “a different way of looking at accountability,” but more of the focus was on “Are you doing these assessments?” as they were intended to be administered and analyzed.

Upon asking what teachers expected to take place at this year’s scoring session, my questions were met with responses that aligned with my analysis of the scoring protocol (see Chapter IV) offered through the summer’s professional development. In seventh grade, Bob discussed meeting as a PLC, in which “we’ll grade them together and get a common assessment of what we’re all looking for...so it doesn’t matter what class the student is coming from it’s going to be the same evaluation.” Morgan further expressed the importance of establishing consensus, in that “We’ll start to make sure we’re all on the same page with the scoring” and “try to establish a gauge and calibrate what a 4 was, what a 3 was, and share some examples to make sure we’re all hitting that.” Afterward, they would separate to grade their respective assessments individually, then come back together the following week if they had specific questions (i.e., “What do you think about this one?”) or needed collegial support (i.e., “What did you find?”) (Bob).

Sixth grade teachers' anticipations were similarly aligned with the intended protocol, with minor differences in comparison to the seventh grade. As the grade level chair, Lisa established and communicated the expectations of each teacher prior to their PLC scoring session. As a form of advanced preparation, each teacher used the rubric to pull out "2 highs, 2 middles, and 2 lows." Next, they sat together as a team and read over several samples, then calibrated their scores to find consensus of what a high, medium, and low by following a rubric with a 4-3-2-1 rating, "like proficient, emerging, novice..." (Lisa). Steve anticipated some differences in interpretation, but stated, "hopefully we'll have an overall consensus of what a high, medium, low is...[o]bviously, it's more difficult to look at data that's not based on a Scantron, using the rubric is the hardest part." This perception was a result of the subjectivity involved in using a criterion-based scoring tool, versus a more objective, multiple-choice approach. Lastly, the samples were scanned and sent to the district level via administration. It was prior to my scheduled observations of the grade levels' PLC scoring sessions that I shared my anticipation through the following insights and inquiry with regard to what I might observe:

I'll be watching and listening for how consensus is reached. Will there be obvious discrepancies or disagreements? If so, on what and why? I'm curious to know where the majority of the scores will be falling out based on different populations of students...Will the teachers host a discussion of next steps? I'll be interested to see any signs of data-informed decision making, as these alternatives assessments are intended to be used for future planning and instruction. Lastly, it intrigues me to think about the possibilities of this type of PLC work impacting teacher practice, if at all. (bridling journal entry, 12-10-15)

Data-informed decision making. Upon observing each grade level engaged in the analysis protocol I found teachers' actions implemented with fidelity and truly aligned with the intended workings of the protocol. Teachers appeared with varying student work samples and their accompanying rubrics to calibrate and score the students' assessments. Common among the observations were the actions of the grade level chair, serving as facilitator, while the PLC members broke down the 4-3-2-1 rubric levels. They calibrated by deciding, "This looks like a 4 paper," then discussed evidence to affirm that level. The groups started with some 4s and then some 1s since the 2s and 3s they felt would become more challenging to distinguish. However, as they worked, it appeared as though the difficulty shifted more toward the dichotomy of a 3 and a 4 level response as well.

I observed some differences in the analysis protocol during each grade level's PLC scoring session. The sixth grade teachers began with a conversation based on preparation and delivery of the PBA. Deedra said to Lisa, "I like how you gave free rein, options of how to create the graphic organizer." Collecting the graphic organizer to view students' brainstorming and pre-writing phases, in addition to the use of highlighters to pull out key words/phrases, were actions all teachers would incorporate next time. Overall, the teachers decided that a student scored "high" if he or she referenced the image and used specific language relevant to an inference while justifying the response, while a "low" score would be given if a student did not refer to the image and provided a minimal or inaccurate response. Once students' specific needs were identified, the protocol called for teachers to discuss general interventions that were needed in their practice. For instance, the teachers decided their students needed teacher and peer modeling, in addition to opportunities for feedback; therefore, anonymous 4-3-2-1 papers (i.e., samples from another class classes) would be featured in a "walk about" display format for

students to view and critique, then discuss in teams. In terms of future instruction, teachers discussed how the open-ended format of the PBA compared to the Achieve 3000 lessons, to which students needed to “think about evidence, and find the evidence,” so it appeared as though this literary support would continue to be helpful. Additionally, Lisa shared her approval of the student feedback/reflection process, stating “I like this because it really stretches my lower achievers” and “hopefully going back over this will reinforce for everyone how to do this next time.”

In seventh grade, although there was a rubric provided for PBA scoring, the teachers decided that a “teacher’s guide” was needed to break down each of the three questions featured on the assessment. While constructing their own guide, they spent a great deal of time determining which primary sources (A-F) could be acceptable answers, then deliberated why each was a good fit. This became a bit tricky because several possible answer could have been applied, and it all came down to how well the student justified his or her response. Significant to the teachers’ engagement during the analysis phase was the diagnosis of data for students’ strengths and weaknesses. The teachers determined that overall the students had an accurate understanding of the content and could analyze the primary sources; however, it really came down to the quality of justification provided for each of the responses. Based on their conversations it appeared as though students’ justification and rationale for their choices needed more attention and detail. When there were any student misconceptions read aloud, Morgan would stop and say to the group, “now let’s talk about this further” as a means to prompt the group’s thinking about student remediation. Another matter of consideration arrived at determining the overall score, because there were three to score separately, to which the teachers

decided to go with the average score. Unfortunately, the teachers ran out of time before getting a chance to discuss interventions; therefore, they decided to meet again after the holiday break.

Interventions in action. Significant to teachers' work in the PLC was the identification of areas in need of re-teaching, and the development of interventions in their practice to further support students' proficiency of the content and skill sets. Morgan, for instance, shared how her students' data were analyzed "to not only shape future assessments...but to also think about remediation that we'll offer for our students." When following up with Morgan during a post-interview, I learned how her students' scores reflected a limited number of 4s and 1s, to which most students were in the 'developing' or 'emerging' stages (i.e., 2s and 3s, respectively). Specifically, she recognized areas where the students "could develop their communication about what answer they selected." She continued to explain, "I want to see growth from them and how they tell us WHY they picked a certain answer." In terms of tracking student growth over time, Morgan set goals for her students "to be hitting a 3 or a 4 on the assessments" because she believed each and every one of her students was certainly capable. To that end, Morgan recognized the need to incorporate more opportunities in her daily instruction for students to provide rationale for their thinking through supporting evidence and details that justify their responses.

Along similar lines, Deedra recognized her students' scores reflected a high number of 1s. Instead of finding faults in her students, she self-evaluated her own teaching practices, and "went back and retaught" (Deedra). She elaborated, "I thought about how I was teaching certain things and I incorporated other activities which hopefully helped to be able to next time get it." Several of the literacy strategies from the professional development, including the Achieve 3000 lessons, aided in this support. Additionally, Deedra held herself accountable to specifically

respond to her students' needs with disciplinary literacy, and therefore, "started incorporating more charts, maps, and graphs" into her teaching and strategically modeled how to read and analyze them. She had her students practice these skills until she "felt that the kids really understood how to analyze charts and graphs and pull out the key information" (Deedra).

While analyzing data, Bob pointed out that "you're looking for key parts of understanding, and if students were incorrect, that's when you know that, 'OK, maybe we need to revisit and revise our learning to make sure that they have it.'" After scoring the alternative assessments, Bob took class time to further model the expectations for his students, based on the rubric criteria:

I gave them a good example [of an answer] of what we were really looking for, ...this is what we weren't looking for, ...this is what a 1 looked like, ...this is a 4. So I gave them an example and read it to them, put it up on the board so they could see it because they're going to be doing this for the remainder of middle school and high school.

I identified Bob's actions as a response to the district's support through professional development, to which teachers were encouraged to utilize student data for formative purposes that would drive instructional decision-making and best meet students' needs. As support, Dr. Jones acknowledged how although the state didn't necessarily intend for districts to be "producing a score for each child," teachers used the opportunity and the tools "formatively, not really summatively" to enhance the teaching and learning process.

In general, the responsive actions exemplified through the analysis protocol indicated the teachers' intentionality to center their practice on addressing students' needs. In doing so, teachers were able to improve upon best practices of utilizing rubrics as scoring tools, analyzing

trends in student data, and enacting interventions in practice as intentional means to model expectations and engage in responsive feedback.

Lines of Communication and Collaboration: District and Teachers

As participants in the support systems enacted by the district leaders, the ongoing communication and collaboration between the levels was enacted through multiple formats and resulted in mixed responses. Upon asking for teachers' perceptions of the communicative and collaborative supports between the district and school levels, Steve expressed appreciation for the overarching message of extending teachers' initiatives with alternative assessment in their everyday practice. He specifically commented on an email received from the Landstone's social studies department, encouraging middle school teachers' continuation of classroom practices with alternative assessment:

They're doing the right thing by encouraging us to write our own tasks that are shaped for our demographic...maybe it's doing one or two alternative assessments per unit for your school...it's putting it in our hands to decide what's best for our students. And maybe that's where it will always be.

Steve recognized this as his green light to continue crafting future performance-based assessments that would benefit and motivate his students, all-the-while, satisfying his philosophy of how students are best assessed in their content understanding and skill set performance.

New to the profession, Deedra shared the support received from the district level, mainly through multiple school visits from the district coordinator, Ms. Pratt:

[The Social Studies Coordinator] has come over and I was able to meet with her during new teacher training and in the classroom,...she sends us emails on a regular basis and

she attended one of our PLC sessions. So that support alone, knowing that you have a specialist in your corner who can help you with whatever you need, that's been very helpful.

Deedra felt comfort from the presence of the district, realizing they were investing their time with the social studies teachers to ensure they understood the new responsibilities, in light of the reform, that were to be enacted at the school level.

If there was room for improvement between the district level and the schools, the teachers from both grades expressed a desire to receive some feedback regarding the student samples submitted to the district. Both grade levels received several communications to submit student samples for each of the students' scores (4-3-2-1). A suggested improvement to this process included teachers' submission of class averages as well, as a way to inform the district about how "all students were doing on the assessments" (Lisa). Furthermore, the teachers expressed a desire for closer, two-way communication between the levels, as an element of importance to the teachers' future practice with the PBAs. After the student samples were submitted, it was recommended that the district should provide feedback after checking over the submissions of student samples from each school, and offer any suggestions. "As with anything new there are bound to be some glitches" according to Steve, while Morgan remained hopeful that everything "will smooth itself out over time."

Additionally, seventh grade teachers acknowledged at times slow or inconsistent communication caused some glitches in administering their first alternative assessment this year in a timely manner. It was brought to my attention during several interviews that the seventh grade Westward Expansion PBA was to be administered back during Unit 1; however, a lack of clear communication caused a postponed delivery in Unit 2. Morgan and Bob expressed how

“the communication had been a little bit of a problem” (Bob), “so then it was a little rushed as far as pacing to ensure that the assessments were administered” (Morgan). However, positive thinking was expressed in that “As a team we rally through the process and get it done fairly, to do a good job...still trying to carry it out as it should be or how it should look” (Bob).

Bridging Epistemologies and Practice in Light of Reform

The perceptions of and practices with alternative assessment I present in this finding were largely a result of the new accountability system during the midst of the reform. Mainly, the ongoing development of teachers’ perceptions and practices showed evidence of culturally-responsive teaching that stemmed from their epistemologies of teaching and learning. Key to bridging teachers’ epistemological stances with classroom practice were the interventions enacted to create a constructivist teaching and learning environment. These actions extended from the baseline supports provided by the district, mainly through the collaborative culture established within PLCs to support literacy in the social studies classroom. Additionally, the new accountability system renewed teachers’ sense of autonomy in attaining student proficiency of content understanding and skills sets, versus obtaining a particular score.

Linking New Accountability and Practice

Although the alternative assessment reform engendered a transformation in teacher perceptions of assessment accountability, they were truly evidenced through the active roles played out within teachers’ practice. When the SOL test was removed and supplanted with PBAs, the teachers exhibited an increased understanding of how to engage in formative practices to gauge students’ proficiency of social studies content and skills. Furthermore, the reform sparked a more student-centered approach to learning, which teachers welcomed and

appreciated. In the following sections I share specific examples of how two teachers assumed the responsibilities of what I perceived to be “responsive teaching.”

Perceptions and practice: Jill. In light of the reform, Jill adopted a new perspective of accountability, and explained that because the alternative assessments were ongoing her responsibilities with teaching and learning had actually grown to ensure students were proficient in the social studies standards. Assessment became a consistent focus in her practice, not just at the end of the year as it once was under the old assessment system. It was her understanding that “if you see a student who is struggling on the first or second assessment, it gives you a heads up” to which she then had more control over monitoring her students’ performance over time. Jill professed “it’s a different kind of accountability,” and therefore, “it helps you become aware of things you could focus on with them [students]” based on the feedback (i.e., student data) you receive. Growth in Jill’s practice now focused on alternative formats of assessment, and her “comfort level of teaching a problem-based curriculum is way better.” Her juxtaposition was “The parameters are this...and this is what you have to do,” used to describe the rigidity of the old accountability system.

Previously introduced in Chapter IV as the “historical thinker,” Jill held her students accountable to engage as historians, and serve as active learners through relevant and rigorous historically-based tasks. This objective was reinforced through authentic and meaningful contexts with primary sources, technology, and research “to think on a higher level, not just to serve as sponges” (Jill). While drawing attention to how much “today we rely on technology...and it’s “Google, Google, Google” Jill valued teachable moments to engage students with the historical thinking skills since “They [students] have the ability to find out answers” and learn to think for themselves through their own interpretations and opinions. For

example, Jill explained how her classes “have read part of Washington’s Address, and they also read the Monroe Doctrine, so they looked at the actual documents to determine the point of them.” Jill identified the relevancy of such activities with the district-generated PBAs that featured excerpts from primary sources such as speeches, letters, and doctrines. To support written communication skills, a writing task during an early 20th century unit asked students to “Imagine you’re an immigrant, write about your experiences in this postcard.” Through online resources, students acquired an understanding of the content required for the task, meanwhile, adopting a historical perspective to engage with the historical context.

Jill acknowledged growth in her practice to utilize engaging techniques through inquiry-based methods as a means to engage students with the social studies content. For instance, upon viewing a primary source document through the eyes of a historian, she encouraged students to explore their curiosities and fully explore the source:

You show the students an image [primary source], and you give them the big paper in groups and they write down as many questions as they can. But then you take them deeper into open and closed-ended questions. It’s awesome because they’re making their own questions, and they’re challenged to go deeper than just “yes” or “no” and they need to explain it. (Jill)

I observed Jill’s class engaged in inquiry, used as a “hook” to elevate students’ thinking during a *Reading Like a Historian* (Stanford History Group <https://sheg.stanford.edu/rlh>) lesson on the Philippine-American War. As a warm-up, Jill first led students through a Rudyard Kipling poem entitled “The White Man’s Burden” to which she took time for the class to unpack difficult perspectives, language, and concepts surrounding imperialism and annexation. Next, students collaborated and communicated in small groups as active learners who interpreted political

cartoons based on the context of “the circumstances of war.” The final product was a graphic organizer for safe-keeping of students’ justified interpretations of the cartoons. Jill frequently stopped in at the small groups to check for understanding while analyzing the primary sources, asking a series of prompted questions: “What is your interpretation?” “What evidence supports this?” (i.e., corroboration) and “How might you prove this to be a cause or an effect?” (i.e., contextualization). The collaborative nature of the task led to relevant historical conversation, and held students accountable for their learning while she provided diagnostic support as needed. It was after visiting Jill’s classroom that I shared the following commentary:

Today I witnessed true and authentic thinking like a historian through rich activities with primary sources, collaboration with relevant dialogue and inquiry,... it was remarkable to see things before my very own eyes, as opposed to simply hearing about such episodes through second hand sources. (bridling journal entry, 11-12-16)

Perceptions and practice: Lisa. The alternative assessment reform assisted Lisa in making the shift from a teacher-centered to a more student-centered practice, to which the accountability was still present, just in different form. For her, the reform served as a restorative vehicle, as a means to re-engage in old teaching methods that better aligned with her philosophy of teaching methods. Lisa expressed, “I hate to say its ‘old school’ but it is going back to kids communicating with one another” to which the students were held accountable for “producing, teaching each other, a lot of peer teaching.” She still felt “very accountable” for the knowledge and skills her students needed to have before they moved on to 7th grade, but “it’s a different accountability.” During our interview, she confessed how the reform was welcomed to restore her practice to what it once was:

I remember before SOL-testing, and I remember during, and now after. I remember when I first started teaching 24 years ago when you had the freedom and that gift to be able to do the things you wanted to do. And then there was that horrible middle stage, where you had to do things ‘boom, boom, boom’ and you couldn’t elaborate or expand. And so it’s so nice and refreshing to go back to what we used to do. (Lisa)

Lisa, previously introduced in Chapter IV as the “linguistic storyteller,” held her students accountable for assuming the values of oral literacy and civic engagement in the classroom as a means to enhance historical understanding of and collaborative in learning. For instance, Lisa incorporated “a lot of team-teaching, a lot of peer-teaching with one another” as a way to keep students actively engaged and responsible with the historical content. Specifically, Lisa discussed peer teaching through the strategy of “jigsawing.” This method was intentionally used to hold students accountable for first acquiring content understanding independently, then assuming the responsibility as teachers through a presentation of the content to their peers in a small group setting. Her interest “to see the kids at work, especially when you give them what they need and then they go for it” was a way of letting go of the reins and turning control over to the students.

The ways in which Lisa and her students viewed social studies in the classroom have grown with “creativity” and “enjoyment” over the past year. Without time constraints and worrying about having to meet certain deadlines, she better managed her time for students to interact with one another, and expressed “it’s amazing.” With increased flexibility in pacing and planning Lisa has allowed herself to engage in more student-centered opportunities. Under the old system, opportunities for enrichment, such as lengthy research projects and discussion-based seminars, were not considered due to her constant oversight and control over the content students

needed to know in preparation for the SOL test. Under the new system, she valued opportunities to enhance oral literacy through student presentations, for example, which provided them an opportunity “to see one another’s work, and show off,” whereas they “didn’t have time to show off before” (Lisa). Thinking long term, Lisa would like to further grow students’ effective communication skills, so that “it’s not just ‘send the text’ or ‘send the email,’” and instead her students will think on a higher-level while speaking and writing. With strategies like this in place, Lisa perceived herself “as a better teacher” and felt safe to step aside and view her students’ capabilities without her delivery of the content through didactic, teacher-centered means.

Jill and Lisa, whom I referenced as exemplars of constructivist practice, demonstrated their accountability with assessment through various responsive teaching methods. There was an element of intentionality to transform their practice through formative, student-centered strategies, which I found significant in the alignment with the vision behind the alternative assessment reform.

Epistemologies in Action: Culturally-Responsive Teaching Practices

Teachers’ positive perceptions of the reform had a direct impact on their instructional approaches to personalize teaching and learning, which took shape through a myriad of modalities. Teachers’ efforts to meet individual students’ needs and personalize social studies instruction were evidenced through interventions of differentiated instruction that encompassed minds-on and hands-on approaches with social studies content and disciplinary skill sets. Notably, the focus of teachers’ instruction and assessment was centered on formative-based practices to meet students’ levels of readiness, address learning styles/preferences, and establish relevant instruction to motivate students through interest.

While observing the social studies teachers in the field I consciously searched for signs of an established, constructivist learning environment that prepared students for the performance-based assessments. Although teachers' epistemic beliefs of teaching and learning in social studies practice were shared through documented conversations, I sought confirmation through their observed actions during instructional delivery and planning that would serve as supporting evidence. In light of a new assessment system, I discuss the teachers' goals for their social studies practice, each in turn, coupled with descriptions of their active roles in the classroom.

Bob in action. Reflecting on his many years of his practice, Bob shared how he did not feel it was necessary for legislators to interject and tell teachers to engage in alternative assessments, "If you were a good teacher, you just did them, you didn't call them by a fancy name." Bob saw the open-endedness in the reform, and through alternative assessment formats "there are possibilities for multiple right answers" instead of just right and wrong." He explained further, "I've always tried to incorporate different styles of learning...not every student is going to learn best through a test, I think it's something good teachers always do, so the legislation hasn't really changed all that much for me." For instance, compare and contrast activities were incorporated regularly by Bob in order for students "to understand where we come from and where we're at now, and try to relate it to today" (i.e.; economically, socially, politically based on observation). "That part I love, because I love to see what they see as the problems of today." During my observation, Bob led his students through a discussion of a Bell Ringer featuring the question, "What are three economic, social, or political problems facing our country today?" Students were immediately engaged with hands raised, ranging in student responses from terrorism, discrimination, and bullying, to trends in the housing and stock market. He then transitioned them into the "roots of reform" to explore the problems Progressives faced during the

early 1900s. I watched as students communicated and collaborated in pairs, sorting through a series of primary sources (i.e., pictures, newspaper clippings, political cartoons) and interpreting the problems within the progressive era (i.e., contextualization). To reinforce the literacy skills, students wrote a national editorial about one of the problems facing America at the turn of the century and provided possible solutions. As a final product, this piece of formative assessment was authentic, meaningful, and interdisciplinary.

Bob also went to great length in discussing the philosophy of his practice in using the social studies content as the foundation “to engage the kids and put them in a situation, and use the resources.” For example, in an attempt to motivate students through active-learning, Bob shared the novel approach to his lessons:

They love plays for some reason, I mean it’s crazy to think that they like to perform...but anytime we have a play and I’m asking for volunteers, I have more volunteers than I have roles. And then sometimes we’ll create newscasts or commercials from the time, like in an advertisement for an invention or something like that.

Bob’s displayed efforts to engage students in historical simulations, for example, brought an elements of authenticity into the learning environment. There was intentionality to provide opportunities for students to make connections between history and today, which was his aim in “trying to make the lessons relevant for them.” The more practice students received that connected with historical content the better prepared they were for the alternative assessments that required open-response to demonstrate understanding.

Morgan in action. Morgan appreciated the flexibility with pacing to incorporate new methods in social studies practice that resulted in a new pacing schedule. She expressed how the removal of SOL preparations for a test in May provided teachers with “a couple more weeks” to

which she and her colleagues could “stretch out” their pacing to the end of the year. Morgan was reflective of her practice, stating “all tasks need to be rigorous and challenging for them [students], ...SOL test or no test.” Therefore, she regularly provided experiences with historical content that led students toward a quality of understanding, versus quantity. Even though there was no SOL test and nobody is per se “checking” her alternative assessments, she did not feel that she has fallen behind in her performance. “I think every year I strive to be better than the year before.”

To promote effective learning experiences in her practice, Morgan shared the purposefulness behind her pedagogical actions. She communicated, “The hope is that with the variety of activities that we do and the variety of sources that we work with, the students are developing the necessary skills sets.” For Morgan in particular, there was an elevated focus on the historical thinking skills of corroboration, sourcing, and contextualization, emphasized during the professional development training. As the grade level chair, she felt it incumbent upon her to lead the grade level through the provisions of practice students required with these skill sets, especially knowing these skills would appear on the alternative assessments. First, Morgan took the lead on the creation of a “historical thinking skills pre-assessment” for students to take at the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year that determined students’ readiness. The pre-assessment featured the historical thinking skills from Sam Wineburg and the Stanford History Group, and resembled the types of document-based questions students would encounter on the districtwide alternative assessment. This data provided the teachers with a baseline from which to plan their instructional pathways of preparation toward the alternative assessments.

Morgan also turned to the work of Sam Wineburg and The Stanford History Group for the support that was needed during the ongoing sequence of teaching and learning. During PLC

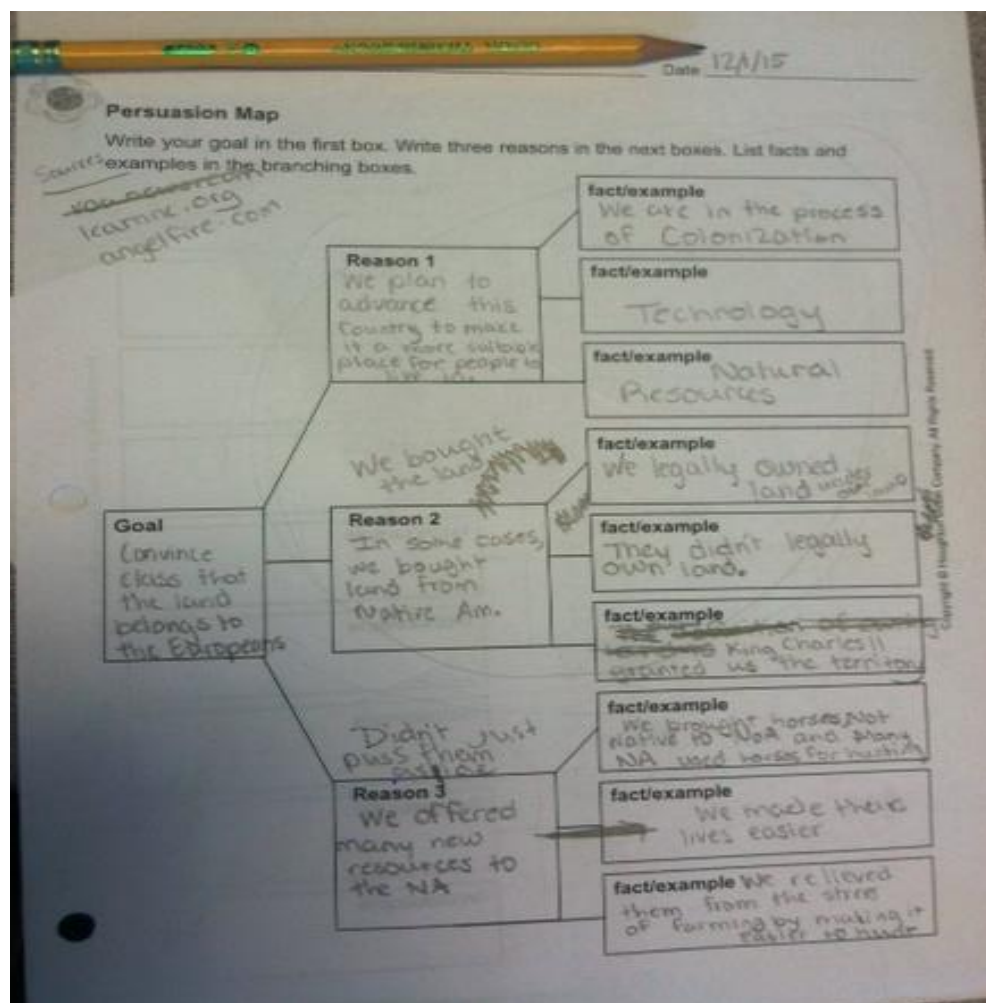
sessions, Morgan ensured the seventh grade teachers utilized these lessons to incorporate an expansive use of primary source documents in their practice, and to ensure “students were working with examples that match what historians actually do.” When assessment time came, students had ample class time working with document-based questions, analyzing primary sources, and engaging in the historical thinking skills sets for preparation.

Steve in action. For Steve, the reform brought opportunities to spread his wings. He openly shared, “As a professional doing this in my 15th year, I love seeing the trend come into my personal philosophy.” Steve explained “I think there’s less pressure and I can be more creative in my planning.” His perception of the teaching role was “to plan out a lesson that not only teaches them, but they’re doing most of the work.” He capitalized on their prior knowledge through pre-assessments and knew how to manage students working collaboratively on a performance task. According to Steve, “My goal is to make it real for them.” Sharing the balance of control in the classroom, he expressed the need to “teach [students] the curriculum” but more so “just constantly getting [students] to connect to something they’re going to face in their life.” As a result, Steve intentionally incorporated more technology and performance-based tasks into his practice.

While visiting Steve’s classroom, I observed his students engaged in the preparations of a performance task entitled, Making the Case, related to the content of the European exploration unit. The learning target posted read, “Today I can persuade and argue my point about who owns the land” while the driving question was, “If we were to go back in time, which side would you be on?” As a lawyer and member of either the Native Americans or the European explorers, students chose a side and constructed a presentation to convince a panel of judges they had a

right to keep the land. Students worked in pairs to complete a persuasion map, used in their preparations to present their arguments (see Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.3 Performance Task Persuasion Map



Steve offered immediate feedback to students while they were preparing their presentations. He frequently stopped to check students' arguments and justification, and would ask "I see the point you are trying to make here, but what else can you tell me to make it more persuasive?" During this co-construction of knowledge, Steve and his students continued to work through ideas to form stronger arguments. Working at varying paces, some students were further along, constructing presentations on computers with visuals, charts, and auditory effects,

while others were creating props as an added element of authenticity and creativity. Notably, Steve engaged his students in civic literacy, while serving as activists in the classroom to address injustices in history. In the process, he consciously turned the autonomy of learning over to students during their tasks, engaged students in various learning styles, and reinforced oral literacy skills during their presentations. With respect to alternative approaches to assessment, Steve capitalized on students' application of knowledge, to which "They [students] have to take everything they've learned and be able to put it together to show that they've learned something...it's purposeful creation."

Generally speaking, an important part of understanding the epistemologies of teachers included recognizing the beliefs that propelled their everyday actions. Included were the perceptions of a teacher's role and how the sequencing of teaching and learning played out in the classroom. As teachers' roles were now perceived as facilitators of literacy, their actions in practice were captured in various ways.

Literacy in Action

Resulting from the reform was a significant emphasis placed on social studies teachers' new roles as managers of literacy in their practice. After years of teaching social studies content, teachers now facilitated literary skills and processes within their day-to-day instruction to best prepare students for the PBAs. With interdisciplinary practice serving as a focal point in the social studies classroom, teachers acquired various pedagogical methods in the interest of maximizing student learning. Such methods to prepare students for intermittent, formative assessments, versus a traditional summative SOL test, changed the look and feel of the learning environment.

Seventh grade: Literacy in action. Expressed through their voices and actions, the 7th grade teachers demonstrated their understanding of “literacy” as a set of generalizable skills to be used across all core subject classes. The teachers valued the use of disciplinary literacy in particular as a means to learn subject matter through authentic and relevant ways. This was evidenced by their instructional activities that emphasized students’ participation as “historians” to acquire historical knowledge and engage with the tools and skill sets in the social studies discipline.

As a result of the assessment reform, the teachers willingly incorporated a myriad of literacy strategies into their instruction to accompany and enhance their social studies curricular content. For instance, in Morgan’s practice she stated how “There are lots of routines and procedures I put in place to help the students learn about the history” to which there is more emphasis on “the skills they’re learning instead of the content.” In an effort to combine reading with writing, Morgan specifically referenced a literacy strategy “SQ4R,” provided in the *Literacy Toolbox* through the Language Arts department. Students first engage in paired reading, they survey the reading by asking questions about what they are going to read, and then follow the 4 Rs: Read, Review, Recite, and Reflect. This particular protocol required students’ use of inquiry as an element to immerse in deeper thinking with the content, meanwhile, engaging in purposeful literacy skill sets. With respect to professional growth, Morgan stated:

I say to the students now, more than I would have before about, ‘When we’re being historians’ ‘When we’re thinking like historians...there are more conversations that way, and I think the students realize that it’s more about the skills they’re learning and less about the content...we are teaching them skills that can be used in other classes.

In this case, the literary skills served as an interdisciplinary means to engage students in authentic roles as historians, actively exploring the social studies content for self-determined meaning. In another instance, Bob served as a “facilitator of information,” as he preferred to have students “work as much as they can with the materials, the artifacts, the readings, and try to come up with the information themselves” instead of feeding it to them. To meet students’ readiness needs, formative strategies were essential in Bob’s classes, which he described as “a true democracy” representing quite a diverse mix. When tasks become significantly challenging, Bob would “pair up one student being a little bit stronger academically and one student that needs to be pulled along a little bit so they learn some good habits.” He used the examples comparing Sinclair’s 1906 *The Jungle* with Schlosser’s 2001 modern reading of *Fast Food Nation*, to which “one partner [lower or grade level reader] reads *The Jungle*, and the higher-level reader reads the *Fast Food Nation* and they kind of compare notes.” Regardless of readiness, he challenged students’ thinking with questions to compare historical time periods, such as “What was the problem then? What are the problems now?” And see if the problems are the same.” Furthermore, Bob recognized his students’ needs and explained that while analyzing historical documents there is oftentimes a need to “chunk it for them [students], and simplify the language some to make it a little easier for them.” In anticipation of students’ needs with literacy, Bob took necessary actions to promote the fruition of student achievement. While interviewing, he proclaimed his pedagogical support to establish a strong foundation of literacy to assist with learning the historical content:

One of the ways they [students] can improve with reading older documents is through being able to read well. We lag in reading skills, they’re way behind. I have some

students with a 250 Lexile score, so how can we expect them to be successful on a test when they can't even get through the vocabulary?

Bob perceived the idea of improving students' reading and writing abilities, alongside the historical thinking skills, as "a wonderful idea" and did not mind using his class time to reinforce these skill sets.

Table 5. 1 The 12 Literary Defense Strategies

Strategy	Description
Point-Prove Explain	Assists the writer in organizing material logically by establishing connections between making a point, supporting with evidence, and further explain in one's own words
Cornell Notes	Active organization of note-taking through establishing key questions, essential ideas, and composing a summary; improve study skills
Probable Passage	Activate and assess inquiry and prior knowledge about a topic by making predictions prior to reading/learning
Read Around the Text	Preview text visually through a series of steps that allow students to examine essential elements prior to reading
C.R.A.F.T.	Engage in a prompt and perspective with a select format of written communication; the role as a writer is significant to a given audience
Framer Model	Active engagement in reading (pre, during, post) with words or concepts; organizer used to monitor or assess vocabulary and build understanding
Logograph	Transform reading of text into visual representations that justify its connection and meaning
Philosophical Chairs	Consideration for alternative perspectives; oral communication is persuasive while students think critically and ponder
Give One – Get One	Structured academic discussion between peers; verbal exchange of ideas in a safe, engaging manner
Gallery Walk	Active engagement through discussion as students engage in various tasks around the room; teacher assesses for understanding
INSERT	Interaction with text while reading with purpose; insert marks in the text associated with different meanings (i.e., check – got it!)
GIST Statement	Summarize a text reading using a 20-word statement; focus on main ideas to demonstrate comprehension, aids in retention

Sixth grade: Literacy in action. As a collective group, the 6th grade social studies teachers in particular embraced the district's introduction of the "12 Literary Defense Strategies" which was a collection of literacy methods (i.e., oral and written) incorporated across content

areas to support interdisciplinary instruction in grades K-12 (see Table 5.1). In all three classrooms, a poster that featured these strategies hung at the front of the classroom. These strategies were used to support the social studies content in a variety of ways, to elevate critical thinking, and encourage student ownership of learning.

Lisa, the grade level chair, spoke on behalf of the significance of literacy's new role in the social studies discipline, stating "I think it [literacy] has always been around, but I think that when working with us and working with the '12 Literary Defense Strategies,' the literacy is huge." For the past year and a half, the teachers had been incorporating the strategies into social studies planning, "such as the GIST," used on a regular basis whenever there was accountability with reading a passage and demonstrating understanding. To prepare students for effective organization and construction of open-ended responses, Lisa engaged her classes in specific "defensible writing" strategies. For example, prior to constructing a formal written response students brainstormed ideas using pre-writing Venn diagrams and charts, or she incorporated the Logograph strategy with text comprehension and response through uncovering the main ideas.

To support sustained reading and to accompany longer reading selections, Lisa engaged students in a K-W-L Literacy Chart, retrieved from the *Literacy Toolbox*. She notes, "It is for reading purposes, 'What can we say about that we already know?' I wanted to grab their interests, and spark something or get something rolling" as opposed to simply having students read and answer questions. Lisa acknowledged the need "to motivate them before they read" using various defense strategies because they wouldn't necessarily engage themselves similarly on their own accord. In need of literary assistance, Lisa shared her appreciation to have access to a Literacy Coach during the school year, and made it a point to meet with her regularly. She expressed, "Our literacy coach, she's great, and good with resources. Many times I'll send her

an email saying I need some stuff on this, and the next thing I know, she's got it and has applied it to one of the strategies." Overall, Lisa's willingness to break free from old routines and try new ideas and strategies benefitted her students. As a newfound risk-taker, Lisa candidly acknowledged, "I can't say I would have done this in years' past."

Although Deedra was still a novice to the profession, she embraced her own unique set of accountability standards based on her philosophy of the discipline:

We teach students it's not just about history, but we teach them how to perceive the world, how to look at things and examine everything they know and form an opinion based on our past, present, and where we're headed in our future.

To explore such constructs in her practice, Deedra relied on elements of literacy and methods of inquiry as vehicles to translate historical knowledge and understanding in the discipline. For instance, Deedra shared her advocacy for literacy methods by utilizing the 12 Literary Defense Strategies:

I think the best thing we do is the 12 Literary Defense Strategies. I think the literacy strategies are very important...I just did Concept Circles, and literally this is one of the ways where I can see the strategies are helping with the assessments...they're making those connections. The Insert Strategy is used as a student is looking at an assessment, and we're teaching them, "What are you looking for? What are the key components in this paragraph? We use Point-Prove-Explain for writing assignments, and use Logographs as a way to make visual-text connections...this helps them retain information with memory.

During an observation, Deedra engaged her students in Cornell note-taking (a.k.a. two-column note-taking) while exploring the economic, social, and political concepts of the Jamestown

settlement. Deedra expressed how she relied on Cornell Notes as a literacy strategy to reinforce summarizing, to “get the key points” and “read with purpose.” Across the grade level, Cornell note-taking was prevalent and portrayed as an effective strategy incorporated into the middle school’s social studies curriculum. This made sense because Kingsville Middle School was an AVID site and Cornell note-taking was commonly associated with the program.

To accompany literacy, I observed Deedra’s frequent modeling of inquiry in the classroom through her prompted questioning. She would often pause and ask, “Why are we learning that?” which caused the students to pause and think, and form their own interpretations. Additionally, Deedra’s recurring prompting of “Why?” with students’ responses was effective in the classroom as a way to elevate their thinking and reinforce oral literacy skills:

Everything I do we talk about WHY. When my students make a statement they can’t just say, “Well, I feel like the Spanish treated the Native Americans badly.” ... “Well, why?” “What do you have to support that?” and “What have you read that shows this?” So whenever they make a statement they need to go into explaining why.

To Deedra, it was about asking the right questions to obtain rich dialogue and written responses, and to promote higher-level thinking and effective communication. She expressed, “If you ask the right question, that’s where the learning really begins with my students.” To further encourage her students’ thinking and communication, Deedra will continue to reinforce the use of rubrics as effective measurement tools to self-monitor their progress.

Steve also expressed the importance in oral literacy in his practice, exclusively viewed as “real-world skills.” He would regularly rely on Bell Ringer’s at the start of the class period to provide students with situations that required decision-making. Knowing the alternative assessments called for students to form arguments with supporting evidence, he felt a good

starting point for practice would be “to tie in their real-life situations.” For instance, making an argument on “getting to spend a night at their friend’s house,” would further prompt their thinking while transitioning into a more historically-based prompt that required analytical points and rationale. For instance, while I observed Steve’s classroom during a warm-up “mini-debate” for the upcoming performance task, students were required to become persuasive debaters to defend “Why the European’s owned the land they claimed was theirs.” It was part of the classroom routine during these moments of discussion for students to stand when they had something to share. Their voices projected, they stood with confidence, and were required to start with a point and support that point with evidence. Steve shared with me that this was a protocol they had been working on all year to create a culture of open dialogue. Steve found this method to be effective for all open-response formats he provided his students, exceeding the focus beyond preparation for the district assessments.

In response to the alternative assessment reform, teachers assumed their roles as facilitators of literacy and employed various skill sets during their instructional planning and sequencing of teaching and learning. There was an intentionality to stretch students beyond memorization of facts, and teach through literacy-based methods that reinforced conceptual, historical understanding.

Collaborative Practice: Professional Learning Communities

As part of the Plan for Continuous School Improvement at each school, it was customary practice within the PLCs to develop common instructional tasks and assessments. In this section I share my observations of the collaborative work that came from the 6th and 7th grade PLC sessions. Significant among the observed lessons of both grade levels was the development of student-centered lessons that included historical thinking and disciplinary skills sets to support

the content. Students served as active learners through a balance of independent and collaborative tasks that catered to their interests and choices. These skills sets were used in conjunction with the content objective(s), or “learning target(s),” clearly posted within the classrooms and evidenced within the process of teaching and learning.

Grade six: Collaboration in action. During their PLC time, the 6th grade teachers planned two common assessments to meet the standards/objectives for the Ancient Empires and Early Exploration unit, mainly those that addressed the early European explorers around the 1400-1500s. Planning the assessments called for the creation of learning targets, gathering of technological resources, and collaboration with the media resource specialist within the school. To accompany these tasks, Steve, Deedra, and Lisa developed accompanying assessment tools (i.e., rubrics, checklists), that were shared with students to communicate their expectations prior to and during their work.

Two main learning targets were written and later posted in the classroom during the engagement in the tasks. For the first task, the learning target was to “Explain the intentions and outcomes of the early European explorers.” This generated task called for students to engage in a project that included researching six European explorers for a geographical mapping project that outlined exploration navigation routes, followed by research of the explorers’ motives for travel, their contributions, and accomplishments for their countries. European exploration maps served as artifacts and demonstrated students’ geographical mapping skills, to include exploration routes across various land and water features, a compass rose and map legend. Significant to the project was the collaboration between the teachers and the library media specialist to meet students’ needs with conducting research. Prior to the lesson, the library media specialist spent a class period modeling how students could effectively conduct research on their

topics by evaluating Internet sources. Essentially, the research projects on European exploration called for students' to validate their sources (i.e., sourcing):

“What is valid?” And so we’ve been talking about “How do you ascertain whether or not this website is objective or subjective? Do you see a lot of opinions? Do you see a lot of emotions in what this person is writing?” Because when it’s subjective there shouldn’t be any emotions in it, it should be all factual based. (Deedra)

Although teaching research skills was traditionally a task taught by the English teachers, the social studies teachers valued the lesson because it was an effective, student-centered means of acquiring the historical content.

Following this task, teachers planned for a more extensive project that met the learning target of “Describe the interactions between the European explorers and the Native Americans.” This task called for the creation of a PowerPoint presentation that featured the cultural interactions between the European explorers and the Native Americans to which students needed to explain how their actions influenced the outcome of events. Presentations were generated on the computer with creativity of text features, animation, and images. The European explorer PowerPoint projects I observed in Lisa and Steve’s classrooms were differentiated by interest. According to the standards, there were six explorers they needed to know; however, Lisa noted that “there were five others that they could pick from a list of explorers to further investigate” as a form of enrichment. Lisa further expressed her rationale for catering to students’ learning styles with projects, sharing how “as a child, and I am still, a very visual person and hands-on, so that always helped me learn.” For the same explorer project, Deedra gave students free reign to design the presentation however they wanted: “I gave them a template but a lot of them decided

that they wanted to use their own template to add creativity through the form of artwork and technology (i.e., narration).”

Grade seven: Collaboration in action. The seventh grade teachers used their PLC time to plan for a single common assessment that would meet the standards/objectives for the Progressive Reformers unit during the time period of the early 1900s. Planning the tasks called for the creation of learning targets, planning for collaborative research, and technological resources. To accompany these tasks, Bob, Morgan, and Jill also developed accompanying assessment tools (i.e., rubrics, organizers), to share their expectations prior to and during their work. The main learning targets were to (1) Describe the social, political, and economic factors of the late 1800s/Early 1900s in the United States, and (2) Identify the progressives and their contributions during this era in history (at the turn of the century). Ultimately, the teachers utilized the method of project-based learning to create Progressive Reformer presentations. Jill, Morgan, and Bob first established collaborative, research groups that were based on numerous Progressive figures from the early 1900s. For authenticity purposes, students were to present their findings from the perspective of the reformer during that time period as a “narrative,” featuring the findings from their research.

In Jill’s classroom, students’ active learning occurred through the creation of an electronic “Padlet” board using the iPads. Prior to the project, Jill relied on the assistance of the Computer Resource Specialist to teach students about “Padlet” on the iPads during a scheduled mini-lesson. For the classroom project, the iPads were used to share students’ research findings (i.e., narratives), accompanied by a three-dimensional triaroma depicting the progressive figures “in action.” Similarly, students conducted collaborative research in small groups on progressive figures from history in Jill’s and Bob’s classrooms; however, students’ research was featured on

posterboards, as opposed to iPads, to accompany the triaromas. The Progressive reform projects in all three classrooms were conducted by students in “high interest groups,” to which the students’ selected their reformer based on personal interest and/or choice. Displaying the three-dimensional triaromas and narratives around the room allowed students to teach one another about their respective figures during a “gallery walk” session. During their travels, students completed progressive reformer booklets, taking notes on the information acquired from one another’s products on display. While observing the gallery walks, I commented on how the nature of the constructivist learning environment turned the responsibility of teaching and learning over to the students while the teachers were able to freely float from one project to the next and formatively assess students’ understanding.

In general, the collaborative lessons that derived from the PLCs were centered on historical content and interdisciplinary skills sets. The teachers’ roles were that of “a facilitator,” gauging progress through probing and formatively assessing progress through collected artifacts. The lessons were intentionally student-centered with clear steps on how students could responsibly work from one task to the next and use their time efficiently. To that end, each teacher posted a clearly outlined agenda on the Prometheon Board at the start of each lesson as part of an established routine. As stated in my journal, I found the classrooms to be comfortable and the tasks to be respectful, both rooted in constructive learning.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I presented three themes to share participants’ lived experiences regarding the impacts of the assessment reform on their epistemic belief systems of their social studies practice. Specifically, I capitalized on their perceptions of the reform and how these perceptions impacted their practice as a means to address my research question; meanwhile, fully describing

the phenomenon of this study in a rich, educational context. The themes, or findings, were presented in a format that told the story of their transitions from an old to a new assessment accountability system. First, while telling the story of teachers' transitions from the old to a new assessment accountability system their initial pedagogical reactions, both personal and professional, were revealed. Next, the "common ground" between district leaders and teachers was illustrated, focusing mainly on the intervention of professional development, from which additional supportive considerations stemmed. Lastly, in the presentation of the ongoing development of teachers' culturally-responsive teaching, actions that linked accountability to practice through literacy and collaboration were shared.

In Chapter VI, I present discussion points related to the existing literature (i.e. knowledge base) and the study's findings. These essential ideas bridge the gap between assessment policy reform and educational practice with regard to the scaffolds and interventions provided for teachers. Notably, attention is paid toward the implications for social studies educators, district leaders, and state policymakers in their efforts to address the growing demand for pedagogy that best supports the practice of alternative assessment. Concluding thoughts address the need for continued research and contemporary findings on the topic of alternative assessment reform in the 21st century and the potential impact for student learning.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION

In this chapter I reflect on the findings from this study to provide a deeper understanding of the why and how behind one district's initiatives to enact alternative assessments in response to state assessment reform. Mainly, I discuss what the findings suggest about the role of alternative assessment as it pertains to teachers' perceptions and classroom practices. Furthermore, I discuss the ways in which the integration of alternative assessment policy reform, accountability, and educational practice work within and across the three educational environments – the state, district, and classroom.

Consideration is given to the significance of my findings with previous studies and theoretical stances outlined in the literature. In light of research, theory and practice, this chapter serves as the basis for practical implications, and implications for action related to the phenomenon and results of this study. Of significant importance is the role of alternative assessment as it relates to both policy reform and teacher practice. Therefore, I feature main sections to elaborate on the implications for select stakeholder groups bounded within the Educational Environment Theoretical Model, as the reform was intended to work across its levels. I begin by stating the implications for alternative assessment reform at the state level, followed by implications for the district, implications for social studies practice in the classroom, and conclude with implications for the field of alternative assessment research. In each of these sections, I offer more generalized discussions for practice and scholarship as they speak to the broader interests of various educational stakeholders.

Throughout the chapter I provide plausible explanations as they are warranted by the findings. In several instances I draw attention to how my results support or counterbalance

previous theories and studies found in the literature. Furthermore, I express the unique importance or significance of my findings to the field of education as improvements over previous findings in an attempt to break new ground. Although the findings and immediate implications are related to the Landstone Public School district, I speak to their meaning for broader interests at-large, featured in the context of each educational environment (i.e., level). Furthermore, I draw attention to the implications for future research, as contributions to the workings of this study are appropriate and needed. These are accompanied by the limitations of this study to discuss the uncontrolled variables and unanticipated outcomes, in addition to unanswered questions. Lastly, I offer my conclusions in relation to the role of alternative assessment tied to legislative reform, teacher practice, and student learning. First, I present a summary of the study, followed by the implications of the findings as they relate to Chapter V, and bring the chapter to a close with future research directions and conclusions.

Summary of the Study

In this section I offer a condensed version of previous chapters as a recap of the study to this point. First, in Chapter I, I introduced the Virginia General Assembly legislative removal of five, end-of-year Virginia SOL tests from select elementary and middle school grades/subjects to supplant them with locally developed alternative measures (VDOE, 2014). I discussed the workings of this case study to describe how one, large southeastern Virginia school district has made the adaption during the trial school year of 2015-2016, with movement toward implementation of alternative, locally developed assessments. Furthermore, I highlighted the common problem that exists among states and districts when confronted with assessment policy reform – determining how and why adaptations are made to comply with the state’s demands, and considering how reform changes impact teachers’ practice. The research question guiding this

study is: How does reform focused on alternative assessment influence: (a) teachers' perceptions, and (b) educational practice?

In Chapter II I addressed the main points in the literature regarding 21st century education and how testing and assessment accountability measures are traditionally viewed as catalysts of change in the United States (Linn, 2000). Upon introduction to the Educational Environment Theoretical Model, I discussed the need to analyze the reform as it works across various levels, to ultimately impact student learning. Historical and contemporary political advances were discussed in light of both traditional and alternative-based assessment methods. Significant contextual variables as they relate to teachers' perceptions and practices served as underpinnings of the reform, which included accountability, intentionality, and formative practice. Overall, I address the need for a deeper understanding of the impacts policy reform has on teacher perceptions and practice, with particular attention paid to how the effects of policy reform work across state, local district, and classroom levels.

Chapter III offered a review of the methodology, to include type of research, data collection procedures, data analysis techniques, participants and procedure. The analysis methods of phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2009) and case study (Yin, 2014) were used to capture the voices and lived experiences of six middle school social studies teachers and four district leaders in response to the 2014 Virginia assessment reform during the early months of the 2015-2016 school year. For validation purposes, the triangulation of data collection points – interviews, observations, and document/artifact analysis – was used to capture participants' adaptations to the state's mandates. Semi-structured interviews were 45 to 60 minutes in length, with three rounds per participant. Observations were conducted during multiple rounds of classroom visits, grade-level meetings (i.e., PLCs) and administration of the alternative

assessments. Document and artifact analysis aided in establishing context and adding detail to the findings of the case.

In Chapter IV, I contextualized the role of alternative assessment reform within the educational environments of the state, district, and classroom levels as they were linked to The Educational Environments Theoretical Model, and the Superintendent's Memo (VDOE, 2014) which outlined the state's vision for the reform. Specifically, I provided the necessary context to (1) define the origin of Landstone Public School's initiatives to achieve the goals outlined in its five-year strategic plan, (2) unpack the district-generated alternative assessments by teasing out patterns that emerged from the document analysis; and (3) present overviews and biographies of the secondary and primary participants.

Lastly, in Chapter V I outlined the findings of three distinct themes. The first theme, *A New Beginning: Initial Perceptions and Practices*, compared teachers' initial perceptions and practices in both the old and new assessment accountability systems. The second theme, *Establishing Common Ground through Support: Teachers as Participants*, focused on the intentions behind each of the district's supportive interventions to effectively implement the assessment reform, accompanied by the teachers' perceptions of and participation in these supports. The third theme, *Bridging Epistemologies and Practice in Light of Reform*, presented the ongoing development of teachers' perceptions and practices as evidence of culturally-responsive teaching that stemmed from their epistemologies of teaching and learning. I now begin to present the implications of the research for the state level, representative of the Virginia Department of Education.

Implications for Assessment Reform at the State Level

Virginia's 2014 legislation that supplanted traditional testing for the use of authentic, alternative assessments (VDOE, 2014) contained a vision to support teachers' developmental growth in classroom practice (Solley, 2007). There was intentionality to remain purposeful through the alignment of alternative assessment with social studies curriculum and instructional Standards of Learning (Phelps, 2006). Furthermore, the state's focus on 21st century skills to meet the demands of today's evolving society placed greater emphasis on assessment goals and skill sets that best prepare students for workforce and college demands (Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2010). Such actions met the call for movement toward more rigorous, open-ended assessments that steer assessment away from traditional, standardized methods and in a direction that capitalizes on opportunities to gauge student proficiency through integrated, performance-based methods (Darling-Hammond, 2014; Gordon Commission, 2013).

With respect to the differences between my study and previous literature, I draw attention to Labaree's (2010) perceptions on the testing debate in schools. Whereas the testing agenda of the past may have been externally driven by economic motives, the enactment of assessment reform contradicted this perception through a shift from an assessment system associated with a testing protocol based on test scores, toward an alternative system aimed to enhance the instructional core of student learning (VDOE, 2014). As a result, the intended direction of the reform included interdisciplinary teaching with functional skills sets that would optimally prepare students for an evolving society (Conley, 2014). Moving from an old to a new accountability system appeared as an act of reinstating similar initiatives to the performance-based movement of the 1990s and early 2000s (Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2010).

In the act of bestowing “local control” upon each Virginia school district, the state intended for the reform to seamlessly work across the levels of the district and classroom, to ultimately impact student learning (VDOE, 2014). Considerable actions for monetary support through the issuance of state grants needs were enacted in order to provide support at the district level (Abbott, 2015). This concept aligns with Diamond’s (2012) theory of reform’s intent to tighten relationships between the external (i.e., state, district) and internal (i.e., school) environments with the instructional center serving of the classroom. Virginia’s enactment of alternative accountability policies to address this “core” enhanced instructional outcomes through tighter links between policy and social studies teachers’ practice. In other words, adopting the new policy led toward the enhancement of more rigorous classroom instruction (i.e., content and skills), interdisciplinary instruction and formative practices that adhered to the policy (Diamond, 2012). The notion of accountability served as a notable contextual variable throughout this study, starting at the macrosystem (state) level, then working its way across the other two educational environments.

Although disparities between the political directives from the state level and lower levels can oftentimes surface while passing through the mechanical gears of reform (Cuban, 2013), in this case, attention was paid toward what was needed at the district and classroom levels during the transition for accountability purposes and successful classroom implementation. As outlined in the State Superintendent’s Memo (2014), “desk reviews” addressed the need to follow-up with respective districts to ensure plans for alternative assessments were in place, and coverage of the standards was sound and secure. Furthermore, the state addressed accountability through the call to districts to provide professional learning opportunities in the preparation of teachers’

enhancement of formative, classroom assessments practices that would provide students with continuous access to feedback (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

As challenges may reside in the process of reshaping the formal structures of teaching and learning through a “top-down,” systematic approach to educational reform (Labaree, 2010), this study counters such an effect and offers suggestion on how to implement the responsibilities of the reform seamlessly across the educational levels. First and foremost, there was a strategic and sustained plan of support to offer opportunities for active learning and the sharing of collegial professional knowledge (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). To compare my findings with those of previous studies from of the performance-based movement in the 1990s, in which several states/school districts were unsuccessful in attaining their political and academic initiatives, the state of Virginia accounted for measures in the areas in which the states fell short. For example, teachers from the 30 districts involved in the nationwide CRESST project (Herman, 1992) in general lacked knowledge in the development and use of the alternative assessment formats, and lacked instructional skills with complex problem-solving. In this study the Virginia Department of Education’s offering of the regional grants, initially approved at the state level in 2014-2015 and then renewed for the 2015-2016 school year, was an intentional act to provide professional support during the transition from the old to new accountability assessment system. The regional grant funding provided for professional development training on the topics of alternative and formative assessment, which was led by the support from local researchers and university personnel. In the attainment of collaborative growth, essential working time was provided for district coordinators and teachers to craft their alternative assessments with accompanying rubrics. These actions meet Herman’s (1992) call for training in “assessment techniques and appropriate instructional strategies” through support from the district

leaders. The regional sessions were purposefully designed to build that collaborative bridge between district leaders – superintendents, directors of teaching and learning, curriculum coordinators – and teacher representatives as they attended regional meetings together and made plans for locally-developed alternative assessments (Spillane et al., 2011). A unique feature of this study, which I found lacking in previous studies, was the intentional act of recruiting teachers to serve as members of the Alternative Assessment Development Committee, which left Lisa (6th grade teacher at Kingsville), and I suspect other teachers as well, feeling valued for having a stake in the creation process.

To a greater extent, my findings provide contrast to the literature as they relate to both the theoretical and empirical footholds of the study. To break new ground this research was uniquely approached through a contemporary lens, in comparison to the previous studies conducted during the performance assessment reform “movement” during the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s. Virginia had the luxury of learning from the lessons of past alternative assessment reform initiatives, to which various states had unsuccessful attempts for a variety of reasons (Abbott, 2015). Whereas concomitants of past assessment reform, such as insufficient record-keeping and training, unclear targets, and stress (Koretz et al., 1996) were reported at the local level, preventative measures were intentionally taken by the state board of education through the enactment of regional collaboration between superintendents, chief academic officers, and directors of teaching and learning. The consistency of communication between the macrosystem and exosystem leaders, through state training workshops and regional meetings to attain grant funding and stay abreast of necessary actions of enactment (i.e., professional development), were essential in this charge.

Virginia and Beyond

Virginia's experiment with alternative assessment reform was in its first year of implementation during the 2015-2016 school year, after 20 years of fully partaking in a standardized, traditional system. As a two-prong approach, the assessment reform was intended to gauge student learning through means of application, while serving as a device to change the landscape of social studies teachers' practice (Firestone et al., 1998). Virginia policymakers in this case fully disclosed the predetermined theory of 'how' the given alternative assessments would work within the scope of teaching and learning, in addition to 'what' the assessments were intended to share with the audience with respect to historical understanding and 21st century skill sets (Perie et al., 2009). This research provides evidence that Virginia may serve as a state planting the seeds for a 21st century alternative assessment movement. Moving forward, conversations and actions among policymakers to engender a performance-based movement in the 21st century must look and feel different from previous attempts to advance scholarship with alternative assessment. Critical among these efforts would be the need for extensive data collection used for informed decision-making to support the specific areas (i.e., district support) in need of change.

State policymakers in general would likely benefit from the findings of this study as the state of Virginia extends its formative assessment agenda, moving further away from traditional summative approaches to testing. The insight and knowledge based on the intentions of the 2014 legislation to improve instruction, in addition to the workings of carrying out the reform, would benefit a wider audience of state education boards with similar reform interests. Additionally, this study has implications for state policymakers to take preventative measures in preparing stakeholders at the local level – such as district personnel, administrators, and classroom teachers – in making the transition to a new accountability system. An adopted action plan should call for

considerations of the unique needs of all groups involved, with respect to resources, readiness, expertise, and personnel, to effectively carry out the reform. As additional states consider adopting similar reform, rather than conducting “desk reviews” at random, states may consider enacting an audit across all districts. This may serve as a more consistent format to reinforce accountability, and monitor trends across the state to provide district support in areas that are most in need.

If State Boards of Education are to consider future reform through alternative approaches, more data are needed to aid and support decisions for making the change from the old to a new accountability assessment system. Unique to this study is an understanding of what can happen when “local control” is granted to a respective district, and the decision-making processes based on what is best for teachers and students. In this case, the Virginia Department of Education entrusted local central offices and division personnel to lead the charge of overseeing its vision with alternative assessment reform. Although this study brings greater awareness to the possibilities in one state when superintendents and district leaders communicate and collaborate through a shared vision of alternative assessment, it challenges the field for similar studies to fill a literature gap. This was one, four-month study conducted with a subset of educators and district leaders within a single district in the state of Virginia. There is a need to broaden the scope through a more comprehensive research agenda on investigating the role alternative assessment plays in education across state and national levels, and the amount of control stakeholders at these levels assume.

Implications for the District

In the adoption and execution of a new accountability assessment system there were intentional and strategic efforts to address the “critical relationships” between standards,

curriculum, instruction, and assessment to support the legislative reform, and move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach in education (Gordon Commission, 2013). Furthermore, the district recognized that replacement of assessment formats alone would not resolve accountability concerns, and that assessments would be most useful when teachers were skillful enough to make use of them in their classrooms (Haertel, 1999).

Landstone City Public Schools' adopted action plan called for a purely performance-based approach through the development of locally-developed assessments, as encouraged by the state (VDOE, 2014). The carefully developed and enacted plan was significant to the responsiveness of the district leaders, who provided supportive interventions that aligned with the reform initiatives and middle school social studies teachers' practice. Through the offering of professional development, interventions included teachers' development of PBAs and formative assessments, data-informed decision making, scoring practice, and training with disciplinary and literacy skills. The district's initiatives as they relate to the literature and previously conducted studies are further broken down, each in turn, in the following paragraphs.

Focus and attention was paid to introducing authenticity to the social studies practice while engaging students in the role as historians. The quality design and development of the PBAs encouraged students to think critically and draw conclusions based on complex situations and problems, meanwhile, promoting heightened levels of standards in teachers' practice (Herman et al., 1994). Distinctive efforts were made to embed the globally competitive skills sets of critical thinking, problem-solving, and written communication into each assessment, in addition to historical thinking skills of corroboration, contextualization, and sourcing (Wineburg, 1991). These skills sets were purposefully assessed via criterion rubrics – valued for the ability to assess students' skill sets and to evaluate historical understanding on multiple levels – and

intended to provide feedback to both teacher and student (Marzano, 2002). In the first full year of the reform's enactment, the Landstone district set out to not only meet, but surpass the recommendations disclosed in the State Superintendent's Memo (VDOE, 2014).

My findings have unique importance as to offer new perspectives to previously developed theories and conducted research studies. Notably, the Landstone district leaders invested deeply in the microsystem, or teacher practice level, to empower teachers' with a restored degree of autonomy to experience the changes that would aid in student learning (Cuban, 2013). First, the district leaders assumed the responsibilities associated with the "local control" and enacted the reform with fidelity, as evidenced by the numerous supportive interventions in place to assist middle school social studies teachers' adjustments within their practice. For starters, the intricacies of professional development and effective programming were considered by the district leaders to facilitate professional growth with teams of social studies teachers (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Strategic efforts were made to create alignment between the expectations of the reform and social studies teachers' classroom practice (Spillane et al., 2011) and develop new organizational routines (i.e., protocols and procedures) related to formative practice at the classroom level (Kujipers et al., 2010).

During preparations for navigating the new territory of the state reform, the district leaders considered the impacting factors at the onset, such as the diversity in teaching ideologies, which could create the most challenges in attaining the goal of student learning (Labaree, 2010). This anticipated challenge was accounted for in the department's plans and routines to gauge teachers' readiness within their practice, which included: follow-up visits from the district coordinator, the provision of electronic resources, and encouraged collaboration in PLCs (Spillane et al., 2011). In this case, the aim was for teachers to fully adopt effective assessment

methods in their classroom practice after having developed personal understanding of the fundamentals of formative assessments and their impact on student learning (Wininger & Norman, 2005). In general, this research brings greater attention to how leaders can foster and manage teachers' "interpretive epistemology" to engage students in their acquisition of historical knowledge (Slekar, 1998). The opportunities provided for teachers to engage as participants in the supportive interventions served as outlets provided for traditionalist teachers to break free from their "reflexive conservatism" with traditional pedagogical methods and embrace new and unfamiliar teaching methods.

My findings support the literature and previous studies on the topic of performance-based assessments as they relate to both the theoretical and empirical footholds of the study, mainly through the role performance-based assessment played in social studies practice. Aligned with the literature was the district's effective use of locally-developed, performance based assessments (PBAs) to supplant the traditional SOL tests. Teachers' introduction to PBAs through professional development training would best ensure efficiency with assessing students' proficiency of social studies content knowledge and essential 21st century skill sets. This particular approach to assessment aligns with Anderson's (1998) philosophical beliefs of performance-based practice, particularly as the engagement with PBAs falls in line with constructivism. For instance, the district training stimulated teachers' facilitation of active learning through rich resources such as primary sources, and placed greater emphasis on 'process' through skills sets, versus 'product' of a score. Teaching and learning leading up to the PBAs was encouraged through a shared model, to which students engaged in inquiry and collaborative tasks, allowing the teacher as facilitator to formatively assess historical, cognitive understandings and conative abilities (Anderson, 1998). Furthermore, the greater emphasis of

teaching and learning in the social studies discipline turned to “authenticity” of assessment through performance-based tasks to bring deeper insight to students’ thinking and understanding (Basturk, 2005; Moon, Brighton, Callahan, & Robinson, 2005).

Implementing Changes in Social Studies Practice

The district’s message was clear and understood by the middle school teachers – social studies practice now focused on preparing students for intermittent measures through a formative approach. Accompanying this focus was the alignment of teachers’ perspectives of and intended purpose for alternative assessment, moving from assessment “of” learning to assessment “for” learning (Bennett, 2011; Thomas et al., 2011). Under the old accountability system, the expectations placed upon social studies teachers were primarily product, or SOL score, focused. Adhering to the formative nature of the state’s reform required teachers to capitalize on the use of student data to drive instruction. The feedback attained through formative assessment became a critical variable in a teaching-for-understanding practice, enabling teachers to engage in purposeful decision-making while planning for instruction (Tomanek, 2008).

To enhance social studies practice, the district leaders educated teachers with “evidence-based decision-making” through defining and modeling what making a difference in student learning actually could and should look like (Van Hover, 2008). In related studies, challenges regarding the lack of time and expertise needed for data analysis have been expressed by teachers (Kerr et al., 2006). However, the necessary modeling and practice with student scoring and data analysis was provided by Landstone district leaders during the summer 2015 professional development training. Specifically, the engagement in the protocol of collaboration with data-informed improvement planning was essential to teachers’ ability to disaggregate formative data in the workplace and individualize teaching and learning. Unlike the Metin

(2013) study in which teachers lacked sufficient training, the districts actions afforded teachers the scoring practice with performance tasks and accompanying criterion rubrics that would be necessary to improve their practice and further engage with colleagues at their respective sites.

Whereas in previous years the Landstone district leaders may have had their sights set on attaining social studies SOL benchmarks (i.e., scores), values now resided in more rigorous and relevant disciplinary practice. Tasked with overseeing the implementation of the reform throughout the district, the leaders executed their intentions to have students perform more complex tasks and engage in critical analysis with standards and skills (Kelly et al., 2007; Solley, 2007). Intentionally, the district leaders mirrored the construction of the locally-developed tasks with research-based models of Wineberg's (1991) work through the Stanford History Education Group, featuring the disciplinary skill sets of corroboration, contextualization, and sourcing (Reisman & Wineberg, 2008; Wineberg & Reisman, 2015). The sophistication of this work to build historical interpretations with emphasis on time, place, and circumstances was not only critical to the state's vision with the reform, but also to the authenticity of social studies pedagogy.

Unique to the decision to foster disciplinary literacy instruction in middle school social studies education was the transition made from factual-based knowledge to "interpretive" understanding of history. For instance, the district's decision to incorporate Achieve 3000 into social studies instruction was a means of shifting away from teacher-centered practices that delivered content in isolation with little in the way of meaning-making and historical connections. To then support movement of literacy across the curriculum, student-centered practices using historical reading, writing, and thinking skills called upon students to search for author credibility and positioning as a means to acquire personal meaning of history and the

external world (Binkley et al., 2011). For example, the Achieve 3000 program reinforced students' ability to reason analytically and form arguments based on historical context, all the while expanding students' content knowledge. As a take away, the district's professional development training on this program translated into more meaningful social studies content and teaching experiences at the middle school level.

This study continued the trend of analyzing the actions within professional learning communities (PLCs). Remaining true to the intentions of this space, colleagues' development and growth with responsive teaching was enacted through analysis of students' assessment samples and calibration of the scoring practice to identify overall trends of performance (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006). Whereas the teachers could have left the PLC setting without further action, there were intentional efforts made to use the data purposefully and engage in instructional interventions that addressed the specific needs of the students (Abbott & Wren, 2016). These patterns and frequencies illuminated the study to exemplify how the reform has impacted teachers' practice and the learning of students through formative classroom practice (VDOE, 2014).

Landstown Public Schools and Beyond

As a result of this study, a lesson was learned with respect to the value of open lines of communication and tight-knit collaboration between district leaders, curriculum coordinators, administrators, resource specialists and classroom teachers. For instance, the district leaders' follow-up with teachers was provided through emails, site visits, and the collected sampling of scored student samples, all of which were used to gauge the impact of their interventions with participants' learning over time (Van Hover, 2008). The teachers' abilities to serve as participants in multiple interventions were critical to the successes in their current practice.

The findings of this study with respect to Landstone Public Schools addressed Cuban's (2013) concerns of the heightened emphasis on reform to transform teaching practice, with so little attention paid to occurrences at the classroom level. This study draws greater attention to how the investment of time and support in changing teachers' perceptions of and practice with assessment can serve as a primary means to improve student learning. With respect to the broader population of school districts, stakeholders would likely benefit from the findings of this study as there is potential to gain insight and knowledge to the enactment of state reform and workings at the local level. Just as in this case, leaders should have a predetermined theory of 'how' given assessments will work within the scope of teaching and learning, in addition to 'what' the assessments should share with the audience (Perie et al., 2009). This study has implications for district leaders in particular as they present policy reform with fidelity to school administrators, specialists and teachers in a manner that will meet their respective readiness and implementation needs. Lastly, this study provides evidence for the considerable awareness necessary for the provision of appropriate interventions that would support teachers' enactment of the alternative assessment reform into their everyday practice.

Implications for Social Studies Practice in the Classroom

This line of research addresses the call for a deeper understanding of the impact policy reform has on teachers' perceptions and practice (Nichols & Valenzuela, 2013), while paying particular attention to the "ecological niches" within social studies teachers' classroom environments (Labaree, 2010). Notably, in this study particular attention was paid to teachers' epistemic belief systems. The extent to which these beliefs were enacted in practice, prior to and during the reform, was captured through the words of their lived experiences, in addition to the observed procedures/routines and pedagogical strategies.

Prior To and During Reform

At the very core of this study's theoretical model is student learning, to which the transformation of learning – what students demonstrate and take away from their classroom experience – is ultimately impacted by the daily pedagogical decisions teachers make in their classrooms (Labaree, 2010). This study featured the specific successes and tensions in maintaining the purity of the alternative assessment reform as it made its way across a series of organizational levels to the microsystem level of classroom practice. Specifically, the “contextual constraints” in teachers' practice prior to the reform were mainly associated with the format of time and pressure associated with the attainment of (SOL) test scores (Fang, 1996). After years of SOL testing pressures, the majority of the teachers had grown accustomed to looking at summative data, tied to accreditation status, school rankings, and student demographics, which at times felt as though the reputation of a school and/or the social studies teachers was at stake (Blazier, 2011; Stone & Lane, 2003).

According to the teachers' lived experiences, constraints under the old accountability system had a powerful influence over their teaching philosophies and classroom practice. Knowing their preferences for teaching and learning lied elsewhere, their epistemic belief systems were mediated by the pressures to teach toward the test through excessive content coverage and SOL test preparation, leaving little time for enrichment (Davis et al., 1993; James, 2008; Teague et al., 2012). However, under the new accountability system, the complexities of the teaching practice were enriched by multiple factors, such as the influential support of colleagues during PLCs, the provision of resources from district leaders, and the modeling of instructional methods from building specialists/coaches (Diamond, 2012). With the reform, teachers found a sense of relief, greater autonomy and academic freedom, which left them

feeling accomplished and successful as professionals within their practice and more inclined to teach through student-centered means. Such instances were circumstantial, as each teacher facilitated what he/she valued in teaching: history as a story (Lisa), innovation and creativity (Steve), inquiry (Deedra), historical connections (Bob), thinking like a historian (Jill), and citizenship (Morgan). Across these values ran the common thread of student-centered teaching and learning.

Social Studies Practice in the 21st Century Classroom

In light of assessment reform, my findings have significance in the way of addressing the call for change in pedagogy and how teachers perceive assessment reform at the state level (Stone & Lane, 2003). When Virginia legislation was passed in 2014, the social studies teachers in this study first responded with reservation, until they acquired the confidence to fully support the reform through the changes made within their classroom practices. Contrary to the Grant and Salinas (2008) study on reform, which resulted in minimal instructional change in the classroom, the social studies teachers' responses to the reform not only reflected changes with assessments, but alterations within daily instruction were made to provide the practice students' required for preparation. For instance, similar to the results established by Stecher et al. (1998) there was a significant increase in middle school teacher's practice with interdisciplinary writing, intentionally added to both formative and summative assessments as a literary support. Notably, the integrated strategies employed in practice further supported college and career readiness, such as focusing on critical historical themes (i.e., social, economic, democratic) and the use of team-based learning for motivational purposes to add personal value during literacy-skill development (Swanson & Wanzek, 2013). Most importantly, teachers' use of primary source documents to suit both history and literacy objectives became a focal point in their practice over

the past year, whereas middle school/secondary studies teachers' reported use in previous studies has been minimal (Lucey et al., 2014; Russell, 2014). Such practices took precedence over previous actions employed under the old system, as what was now being assessed (i.e., content and skill sets) served as the focus during classroom instruction (The Gordon Commission, 2013).

Responsiveness to the 21st Century Learner

A notable difference in this study's findings compared to previous reform studies is the expressed changes in teachers' practice based on the reform and the intentionality to adopt alternative, formative assessment formats into practice (Firestone et al., 1998; Herman et al., 1994). Absent from previously conducted studies was the contextual variable of teacher accountability, which this study examined in the space of the PLC for teachers to engage in collaborative planning and construction of common assessments to support the reform. As a result of the supports provided through the district-level professional development, this "response phase" became a focal point in teachers' collaborative PLC practice, which consisted of analyzing student work samples of performance-based, alternative assessments (Aschbacher & Alonzo, 2006). Overall, the implementation of formative measures in their practice changed the landscape of assessment, from assessment "of" learning to assessment "for" learning (Bennett, 2011; Thomas et al., 2011). As a result, the classroom served as a practical space for teachers and students to construct and evaluate learning progressions, while sharing the grounds of teaching authority.

There was a consistent effort displayed to get at the heart of the Educational Environments Theoretical Model with respect to student learning. The social studies teachers' consistent actions of student monitoring, probing, and individualized instruction served as evidence of engagement in formative practices. Individualizing instruction through readiness,

interest and learning styles, was achieved through the ongoing solicitation and delivery of feedback between teacher(s) and student(s) (Hattie & Timperly, 2007). These actions align with the critical elements featured in the “formative assessment cycle” to engender teachers’ responsiveness with students’ needs, and students’ awareness of strengths and areas in need of improvement (Cauley & McMillan, 2010). To compare my findings with the research and theories cited in the literature, special importance is paid toward the attainment of a constructivist paradigm. Notably, this establishment was supported by the Educational Environments Theoretical framework, to which meaning emerged from the interrelations between the four educational environments. For instance, I was fortunate to have observed “autonomous supportive classrooms” to which students worked independently and collaboratively to construct meaning and hone historical skills (Reeve, 2009). The student, as the constructor of personal knowledge, became a master of his or her own learning pathways. This was evidenced during instances such as the European explorers performance task, philosophical classroom debates, and the Progressive Reformers walk about project, to name a few. All instances pointed to teachers’ “constructivist viewpoints” of teaching and learning, to include: shared authority of learning between teacher(s) and students through research and dialogue; value of personal relevance through self-selected (i.e., choice) topics of investigation; and an element of comfort throughout students’ investigations, to which the process and products were sometimes uncertain (i.e., walk about and presentations) (Maggioni & Parkinson, 2008).

Along the lines of teachers’ practice, the findings of this study draw attention to those of similarly conducted studies, to which there were contrasting results. For instance, counter to the Thomas (2011) study which found a misalignment between teachers’ conceptions of practice and their observed actions, I found my participants’ professed beliefs to be an accurate predictor of

their practice. The descriptions of their roles and practices were corroborated during follow-up classroom observations, by means of the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954), to address specific “look fors” during the observation protocol. Similarly, in comparison to the Cross (2009) study – which found teachers’ conceptions to be “fair” indicators of their practice – the findings of this study indicated teachers’ conceptions to be “strong” indicators of their practice, particularly in support of interdisciplinary instruction. I attribute the teachers’ enactment of practices they believed in to the removal of the constraints associated with the old accountability system; no longer were they faced with rigid pacing, SOL test preparation and pressure to attain high scores. The reform was perceived as invigorating, and brought with it the flexibility and autonomy that enabled constructivist practice to take shape.

Kingsville and Smithtown Middle Schools and Beyond

It is likely social studies classroom teachers would benefit from the findings featured in this study, mainly as they learn how to navigate through the development of their practice in a new accountability system. Furthermore, the findings suggest how to get at the heart of the Educational Environments Theoretical Model with respect to a formative approach to teaching and learning. This is greatly achieved by use of and engagement in the cyclical nature of formative assessment as a consistent means of monitoring students’ proficiency of historical understanding (i.e., state standards), historical thinking skills (i.e., corroboration, contextualization, sourcing) (Wineburg, 1991), and engagement in essential college and career readiness skill sets (i.e., critical thinking, problem-solving, and effective communication) (Conley, 2014). I specifically reference this with respect to the responsiveness of teaching and learning through ongoing feedback, as a critical element of learning gains (Hattie & Timperly, 2007).

Implications for Alternative Assessment Research

The findings of this research hold meaning for any audience interested in the implementation of alternative assessment. In essence, this study deepens the understanding of what is happening in teacher practice when alternative assessment reform is enacted. I address the literature gap in contemporary alternative assessment research through my findings that offer an up-close look at the collaborative initiatives and interventions enacted at the state and local levels to invest in teacher scholarship (Cuban, 2013). If the aim is to target the classroom level where ultimately student learning occurs, this research challenges the field to devote further attention to teacher practice that nurtures 21st century learners in preparation for societal demands, such as college and workforce readiness.

This research took into significant consideration the constraints and beliefs of alternative assessment reform to frame necessary conversations around formative assessment in practice. As the reform was enacted to move from a summative to a more diagnostic system of assessment, there were greater intentions made to reinforce teacher accountability in addressing students' needs. Whereas previous literature studies have pointed toward the mismatch of teachers' professed beliefs and their practice, my participants were able to translate their beliefs into practice. Significant attention was drawn to their lived experiences, before and as participants during the reform. No longer were teachers tied to rigid pacing schedules and preparatory demands associated with the Standards of Learning test. Instead, they experienced autonomy and flexibility within their practice that had been missing in the old, traditional assessment system. In light of the reform and district initiatives for support, the teachers portrayed themselves as better teachers; they felt better-equipped to address students' needs and developed a greater appreciation for their work with teaching and learning. That being said, the

situations taking place in Landstone Public Schools had many variables (i.e., history, experience, training, personnel, demographics), and the outcomes were circumstantial. As such, more research on alternative assessment initiatives is needed across Virginia to determine the challenges and successes across other school districts and middle schools, and inside teachers' classrooms, to evaluate outcomes within these populations at-large.

Significant to my research was the lived experiences of the teachers in their movement from an old to a new accountability system, accompanied by perceptions of alternative assessment reform and classroom practice. This research challenges the field of education in general to further promote effective learning experiences in social studies practice, and to further uncover teachers' purposefulness behind their pedagogical actions. There is a need to examine the actions taken that bridge teacher' epistemological stances with assessment, and how purposeful interventions can lead toward the creation of constructivist teaching and learning environments. To meet this call, qualitative research agendas in particular are needed to further uncover the drivers of teachers' epistemic belief systems and how these relate to teaching and learning. Furthermore, taking a deeper look at current scholarship and practice in social studies and literacy would add a greater understanding of how to enact interdisciplinary assessments. Nonetheless, broader questions within all disciplines regarding teachers' values in their subjects and practice need to be asked in order to further uncover how teachers view their roles in meeting assessment accountability demands, and ultimately student learning.

The findings of this study, stemming from the initial research question, add support to deepening the awareness for changes within the teaching landscape, from preparing the test-taking student to meeting the needs of the 21st century learner. There is an abundance of literature that discusses the importance of teaching 21st century skills; however, there is a need

to further uncover the changes being made, in multiple educational environments, to address the demands of college and career readiness (i.e., job-force skills) (Darling-Hammond, 2014).

Particularly in the middle grades, there is a greater need to ensure that assessments administered are aligned with practice, with emphasis on intermittently monitoring student proficiency of content understanding and essential disciplinary skill sets during young adolescent stages of development. For instance, investigation of how variances in teacher preparation impact the quality of students' "learning opportunities" (i.e., engagement with content to develop new understandings) is required to further enrich the specialized education of middle grades teachers (Conklin, 2014). In this light, teachers would likely be better equipped to engage young adolescents in skill sets and make meaningful connections with content, while focusing on their developmental needs.

Lastly, administering assessments alone will not be enough to make this shift. Therefore, research is needed on the types of interventions made in teacher practice to better align instructional methods and skill sets in the classroom that support the nature of formative assessments. This leads to a broader conversation regarding the development of alternative assessments and accompanying evaluation tools (i.e., rubrics) (Moon et al., 2005). Although this study provides one specific instance of the actions employed at various levels to embed essential skill sets into alternative assessment formats, more research is needed on the scoring protocols in place. More specifically, further investigation of who is tasked with assessment scoring and how individuals are properly trained is warranted by the current gap in the literature on these processes. I would suggest longitudinal studies that follow teachers in their practice to investigate teacher scholarship and professional development over time. Similarly, enacting state reform with fidelity needs to be investigated at the district level, calling for in-depth

examinations of the action plans developed, introduced and maintained over the span of several school years.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

In this section, I offer recommendations for ways in which the study could be improved over time. I capitalize on this opportunity to discuss how future studies, dedicated to better understanding the role of specific variables within the context of alternative assessment reform, might contribute to the field of education. Furthermore, implications for further research include looking at the significance of the participants' lived experiences to find comparison outside the boundaries of the Landstone Public School district. During the study, I encountered limitations in the form of unanticipated outcomes or surprises and uncontrolled variables, which further led me to the development of unanswered questions, all of which I share in the subsequent sections.

Management of the local control bestowed upon each Virginia school district is an arduous task. With respect to enhancing educational practice at the district level there was solicitation of student assessment samples that were derived from the disaggregated data during the PLC sessions (Wayman et al, 2012). However, the teachers were left longing for effective and timely feedback as an indication of their proficiency. As this is analogous with best practices teachers enact with students to promote growth through constructive practice, I suggest further investigation of this two-way learning path to determine the extent in which it may impact teachers' practice over time.

This four-month study offered a glance at teachers' practice, during specific moments in time, which warrants further examination on how teachers engage in data-informed decision making processes over an extended period of time. Notably, the epistemic belief systems and practices were similar in nature across the sampling of six teachers for this case study, to which

results could look quite different in other contexts. As a result, I am left curious about the ways in which social studies teachers in general perceive alternative measures and use assessment data to engage in responsive teaching practices. Additionally, time became an impeding factor in this study, allowing for the investigation of only one administered assessment during the 2015-2016 school year. Therefore, researchers should establish an agenda to conduct observations in multiple classroom settings, in the observance of multiple alternative assessments administered through the course of a full school year. For triangulation purposes, further observations of teachers' collaborations within the PLC environment would be critical to investigating teachers' responsiveness with students' assessment data and instructional planning, over time.

Surprises during the study appeared in the form of unanticipated outcomes. For instance, prior to the study I did not realize the extensiveness of the action plan developed by the Landstone's district leaders to enact the reform. The development of literacy was significant among the initiatives, to which the Achieve 3000 was found to be a compliment to the discipline. Although the social studies teachers regularly engaged with literacy strategies, utilized support from a Literacy Coach, and willingly supported their English colleagues in students' development of literacy (i.e., oral, reading, and writing), I see the need for future disciplinary literacy training to further grow their practice. Significant investigations in this learning space have been previously conducted to provide current understandings (Binkley et al., 2011; Monte-Sano et al., 2014; Swanson & Wanzek, 2013). To further grow the understandings of social studies teachers' development with literacy instruction, I see a need to further enact teachers' robust understanding in literacy instruction and examine ways to build upon their use of literary strategies. This is especially important as social studies teachers continue to serve in a new

capacity, teaching through interdisciplinary methods and making literacy/social studies connections.

In terms of uncontrolled variables that surfaced during the study, it is possible these may have influenced the results. For instance, more understanding was needed on the accountability for alignment, such as in the format of an alignment chart that would visibly display the relationships between content and standards in the assessment (Perie et al., 2009). This would have been beneficial to the 7th grade teachers during their scoring process, to which they felt compelled to create their own guide as a result of the missing relationships. For future purposes of professional growth, this may serve as an essential tool in teachers' attempts to create PBAs within their own practice. On a broader level with accountability (state or district), the complexities of PBA development should be considered through alignment research (Martone & Sireci, 2009). Non-existent in this study was the determination of appropriate reading levels (i.e., vocabulary, sentence structure), noting of limitations, clarity with organization, and signifying the purpose of prompts (Martone & Sireci, 2009). Secondly, there was a minor lapse in communication between the 7th grade teachers and the district leaders with respect to the timeline of administering their PBA. As a result of the westward expansion PBA being administered several weeks late in the subsequent unit of study (i.e., Progressive Reform), this may have affected the students' results. However, if students retained the content information and skills over time, as intended through the cycle of teaching of learning, this may not be viewed as a concern. Nonetheless, the timeliness of feedback with students impacts the responsiveness of the student with his or her own learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Lastly, the teacher participants of this study shared similar epistemic belief systems, offering little in the

way of diversification. Although this did not harm the manner in which this study was conducted, the results may have been different had the element of diversity been present.

This study has potential to become part of a broader reform agenda. As each local school board annually certifies that it has provided instruction in the content assessed by the eliminated SOL tests (per VDOE guidelines), the Virginia Department of Education may be interested in knowing the formats or types of assessments being administered (i.e., performance tasks, multiple choice, quarterly benchmark tests) during the 2015-2016 school year and beyond. Comparisons from districts across Virginia are needed, representing diverse levels of socioeconomic status and populations, size, and resources. Constraints and conditions (controlled for or not), would differ from one district to the next, making it difficult to engage in quantitative methodology and acquire substantive results. Therefore, I suggest future research engage in comparative and/or phenomenological, qualitative methodology to uncover the contributing factors to the successes of the reform, or lack thereof, in districts across the Commonwealth of Virginia.

On a Broader Level

After having conducting the study, I am left with unanswered questions that deserve further attention. As the reform was designed with a focus on flexibility and control at the local level, I wonder what reform initiatives were enacted outside of the scope of this study, and across the state. Furthermore, as the social studies standards are projected to change in the 2016-2017 school year, are district levels planning for the future changes, such as with alternative assessment development, refinements and formats? This relates to the extension of state funding through the regional grants, which serves as a contributing factor to the future initiatives and direction with alternative assessment. If this is indeed the case, researchers may want to

investigate the extent to which funding plays a role in assessment reform at the state level.

Additional consideration should be given to the state supports (if any) provided to district stakeholders (i.e., superintendents, directors, coordinators, specialists, and teachers) outside the scope of the regional grants (i.e., training, professional development materials, and/or mentoring). Those who are responsible for overseeing the enactment of the reform at the state and district levels would likely benefit from knowing the impact such supports may have on the implementation of the reform, and how they aid in teachers' practice.

With respect to the interventions that have been implemented since the enactment of the reform in 2014, I wonder what actions will be taken in the future to continue plans for professional development and regional collaboration? What steps will be taken to further develop teachers' practice and grow their understanding of topics salient to this study, such as PBA and rubric development, data analysis, historical literacy? As the research agenda is extended outside the boundaries of Landstone Public Schools, I have developed a series of unanswered questions that pertain to teachers' practice. With respect to the impact the reform has within the scope of teaching and learning:

- To what extent is teacher feedback an existent practice during the enactment of the reform? (Black & Wiliam, 198; Hattie & Timperley, 2007);
- To what extent are opportunities for student self-assessment and/or goal-setting existent in the enactment of the reform? (Aschbacher & Alonzo, 2006; Cauley & McMillan, 2010);
- To what extent are students provided opportunities to transfer social studies content, inquiry, skills, and procedures into authentic contexts that involve 21st century skills? (Libresco et al., 2014; NCSS, 2008);

- In what ways are the alternative assessments assessed (i.e., holistic or criterion rubrics, teams of teacher representatives? (Marzano, 2002; Thomas et al., 2011); and
- To what extent are students motivated by alternative assessment formats? (McMillan & Turner, 2014).

Conclusions

In this final section I offer a summation based on reasoned judgment of the findings. I specifically offer my analysis of the contextual variables – accountability, intentionality, and formative practice – as they relate to the findings. Through considerations of broader issues and making new connections, I offer expansion of the significance of the findings which serve as a means to engender future actions related to policy reform and teacher practice.

Intentionality

Similar to the research findings of Vagle (2006), I discovered the significance of “intentionality” as it relates to the contextual and historical aspects of the phenomenon. Vagle and Dahlberg et al. (2008) explored this philosophically and considered valid points with respect to the role intentionality plays in establishing meaning and understanding. Within this study, the underpinnings of intentionality can be analyzed on two levels: district and classroom. Specifically, the leaders and teachers responsible for carrying out the state’s assessment reform mandates had choices to make: (1) They could have acted with an “interpretive” epistemology by establishing relationships with the alternative assessment and research-based, best practices within the social studies discipline; or (2) They could have remained static in a “reflexive” mindset, or with an objective epistemology, based on what was comfortable, familiar, convenient, or proven to have worked under the old SOL system in previous years (Slekar, 1998). In this case, participants chose the former of the two; however, studies with districts that

opt toward the latter may bring contrast and heightened understanding to alternative assessment research.

In this study, I found participants to be driven by motives such as epistemic beliefs and personal desire to grow professionally within one's craft (i.e., teaching), with the ultimate goal to improve student learning. However, in my bridling journal I reflected upon the idea of different contexts, and that perhaps "under different circumstances, I can't help but wonder what this work might look like at the elementary level, in other schools across the district, and in other districts across the state." Furthermore, now that an understanding of the role alternative assessment plays in the social studies practice has been discovered, how is it that pedagogues at-large see themselves in similar phenomena? In other words, there is a conscious or "intentional" response that becomes a critical factor in teachers' practice and students' learning.

Formative Practice

In consideration of broader issues, Bronfenbrenner's (1989) updated model which acknowledges the "chronosystem," draws much needed attention to the element of extended time. Taking into account constancy and change over time, with respect to the individual student within the context of the assessment environment versus a single moment in time, is critical to identify the impacting variables of the students' development. In this light, the chronosystem featured within my Educational Systems Theoretical Model comes into play with significance placed on the roles of varying assessment formats (SOL vs. alternative assessment). Specifically, this notion speaks to students' previous summative social studies assessments during the K-12 continuum, and counters this with the present, intermittent alternative assessments enacted through the reform. Interestingly, the teachers acknowledged this moment in time as a "period of transition" to which teachers must be responsive to the needs of the

current population, or what teachers perceived to be the “test taking generation.” It is likely that formative practice (i.e., probing, assessment, feedback) becomes a critical driver in supporting the students coming through the chronosystem with respect to readiness, preparation, perceptions and attitudes, and levels of motivation with alternative assessment.

Accountability

The findings of this study suggest that accountability with assessment has changed its look, feel, and purpose during the transition from the old to a new system. The contemporary nature of this study fills the literature gap of investigating the relationship between state policy reform and educational practice at the district level. In light of the recently enacted Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (S.1177) with initiatives to reduce the amount of high-stakes tests, each state must consider multiple measures of student progress to include non-test measures of career and workforce readiness (i.e., globally competitive skills) (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2015). Now that legislators have acknowledged the need for collaboration among various educational levels between states, local districts, school leaders, and teachers, the finding of this study may be used to guide discussions on what this might look like. Furthermore, my decision to utilize qualitative research methodology, through a phenomenological case study approach, with this phenomenon adds to the existing body of knowledge and further contributes understanding of the extent in which state policy can extensively alter teachers’ perceptions and practice. Central throughout this study is the critical analysis of the role of alternative assessment, intended for use as a mechanism to enhance education on several fronts (VDOE, 2014).

While analyzing the significance of the findings, I witnessed that upon shifting the focus of assessment from summative to formative, the role of alternative assessment became the

vehicle for, versus a catalyst of, change in Landstone City Public Schools. Twenty-first century learning, and college and career readiness skills became centerpieces of conversation while demonstrating understanding of the critical relationships between standards, assessment, and instruction (Gordon Commission, 2013). Furthermore, extensive and strategic interventions to meet teachers' transitional needs were provided through the district's plan of active learning (i.e., professional development) and the sharing of collegial professional knowledge and support through PLCs (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). The added layer of accountability associated with the reform – to consistently monitor students' proficiency of content understanding and skills – is in juxtaposition with the traditional, multiple-choice approach provided through a “one time shot,” end of year test. The new accountability system has brought with it the underpinnings of alternative assessment, rich with research-based practices such as academic literacy (Swanson & Wanzek, 2013), disciplinary literacy (Monte-Sano et al., 2014) and the C3 Framework (Pelligrino & Kilday, 2013), to name a few.

Alternative Assessment Reform – The Future

Virginia's actions to move beyond a one-size fits all approach to education serves as a small step toward meeting the initiatives at the federal level with respect to United States education reform. In this offering of final thoughts, it deserves to be recognized that the district's action plan to meet the state's reform mandates was still in its early stages during the 2015-2016 school year. As with anything new, the first full year of the assessment reform was bound to engender some aspects of tension, in one way or another; however, successes were celebrated as well.

Data collection from assessment is a single act, in which the data become meaningful when they are intended to be used for the betterment of students, by state policymakers, district

leaders, school administrators and classroom teachers as collaborative stakeholders. Creating a culture of communicators across the “educational environments” (i.e., levels) means recognizing perceptions, and taking responsive actions through use of every resource to make informed decisions in the environments that best address student learning – the classrooms.

Movement toward true innovation through alternative assessment means not just knowing how to talk the talk, but more so walking the walk. As Virginia's policymakers, district leaders, and teachers work together to refine assessment protocols, future work will need to be supported through evolving actions and communications that indicate the best possible directions for today's learners. As for the fate of alternative assessment in Virginia, time will tell if such an approach to measure students' proficiency with social studies content understanding and 21st century skill sets will be fruitful.

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Appendix A

Cover Letter and Informed Consent

Dissertation Study Introductory Letter
~Old Dominion University~

Dear _____,

I am a doctoral candidate in the Teaching and Learning-Curriculum and Instruction (C&I) PhD Program at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, VA. I am conducting dissertation research on the recent 2014 VA legislature, under the direction of Brandon Butler. As a stakeholder involved in the process of implementing alternative assessments, you serve as an eligible participant that may be interested in this research topic.

I would value and appreciate an opportunity to conduct an in-person interview. In respect of your daily schedule, allow me to explain how much time we will be expected to meet. Individual interviews will be approximately 30-45 minutes long, while focus group interviews consisting of 3-5 members will be approximately 45-60 minutes. I will arrange with you a convenient time and location to conduct the interview. I am interested in your experiences concerning changes in assessment policy and potential impacts on your educational practice. I am appreciative of your time and consideration and am excited about the prospect of working with you on this project. Please let me know if you are willing to participate and the most convenient days/times during which you might be able to meet. Do not hesitate to contact me should you have any questions (alabbott@odu.edu).

Sincerely,
Amy L. Abbott, M.S.
Doctoral Candidate and Graduate Teaching Assistant
Old Dominion University
alabbott@odu.edu

Brandon M. Butler, PhD
Assistant Professor, Social Studies Education
Old Dominion University
bmbutler@odu.edu

~Old Dominion University~
Teacher Consent Form

Project Title:

Alternative Assessment and Accountability: A Phenomenological Case Study on the Effects of Policy Reform and Teacher Practice at the District Level

Introduction:

The intention with this form is to provide detailed information that may affect your decision to participate in this research study. This form also serves as a record of consent for individuals who agree to serve as participants. The purpose of this research is to explore your experiences with locally developed, alternative social studies assessments designed to supplant standardized measures.

Description of Research Study:

Based on the 2014 legislature to remove select SOL tests, the purpose of this dissertation study is to explore how changes in assessment policy have impacted educational practice. With regard to the task of preparing students for intermittent, performance-based assessments, this study will document how stakeholders have made the adaption.

Should you decide to participate, you will be asked to partake in 2-3 individual interview sessions, approximately 30-45 minutes in length. Additionally, you will be asked to participate in a single, 45-60 minute focus group interview consisting of 3 members. Field notes will be taken during non-participant observations of classroom instruction and professional learning community (PLC) sessions.

Exclusionary Criteria:

Eligible participants must have (1) experience implementing the alternative, performance-based assessments during the 2014-2015 school year, and (2) completed the mandatory professional development provided by the district.

Risks and Benefits:

There are no foreseeable risks to you as a participant. There are no direct benefits for participation, however, the results may contribute to professional growth and amend locally developed assessments to best meet the educational needs of teachers and students. The researcher will provide you with a copy of the research results at the conclusion of the study upon request.

Confidentiality:

Any information you provide for this research study will be treated confidentially and kept in a password protected program on a computer in a private office. All data will be immediately destroyed at the conclusion of the study. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications; however, no individually identifiable information (i.e., name, school, third-parties) will be presented.

Withdrawal Privilege:

Your participation in this research is strictly voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. Your decision would not affect the relationship with the researcher or result in any negative consequences.

Voluntary Consent:

By signing this form, you are saying that you have read and understand the research study procedures presented to you in this form.

I, (print full name) _____, have read and understand the foregoing information explaining the purpose of this research and my rights and responsibilities as a participant. My signature below designates my consent to participate in this research, according to the terms and conditions listed above.

Signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's Statement:

I, _____, certify that I have explained the nature and purpose of this research, including benefits, risks, costs, and procedures. I have described the rights and protections afforded to human subjects and have not pressured, coerced, or pressured the participant into participating. I am aware of the obligations under state and federal laws, and promise compliance.

Signature _____ Date _____

Should you have any questions, please direct them to the project researcher, Amy Abbott (alabbott@odu.edu) or the Darden College of Education IRB committee chair, Dr. Ed Gomez (edgomez@odu.edu.)

***Return Procedure:**

Please send this form in a secured Pony envelope to: Amy Abbott (GRT) at Green Run Collegiate.

~Old Dominion University~
Central Office Personnel Consent Form

Project Title:

Alternative Assessment and Accountability: A Phenomenological Case Study on the Effects of Policy Reform and Teacher Practice at the District Level

Introduction:

The intention with this form is to provide detailed information that may affect your decision to participate in this research study. This form also serves as a record of consent for individuals who agree to serve as participants. The purpose of this research is to explore your experiences with locally developed, alternative social studies assessments designed to supplant standardized measures.

Description of Research Study:

Based on the 2014 legislature to remove select SOL tests, the purpose of this dissertation study is to explore how changes in assessment policy have impacted educational practice. With regard to the task of preparing students for intermittent, performance-based assessments, this study will document how stakeholders have made the adaption.

Should you decide to participate, you will be asked to partake in a single, 60-minute focus group interview consisting of 4-5 members.

Exclusionary Criteria:

Eligible participants must have been actively involved in the previous pilot study conducted by the primary researcher.

Risks and Benefits:

There are no foreseeable risks to you as a participant. There are no direct benefits for participation, however, the results may contribute to professional growth and amend locally developed assessments to best meet the educational needs of teachers and students. The

researcher will provide you with a copy of the research results at the conclusion of the study upon request.

Confidentiality:

Any information you provide for this research study will be treated confidentially and kept in a password protected program on a computer in a private office. All data will be immediately destroyed at the conclusion of the study. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications; however, no individually identifiable information (i.e., name, school, third-parties) will be presented.

Withdrawal Privilege:

Your participation in this research is strictly voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. Your decision would not affect the relationship with the researcher or result in any negative consequences.

Voluntary Consent:

By signing this form, you are saying that you have read and understand the research study procedures presented to you in this form.

I, (print full name) _____, have read and understand the foregoing information explaining the purpose of this research and my rights and responsibilities as a participant. My signature below designates my consent to participate in this research, according to the terms and conditions listed above.

Signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's Statement:

I, _____, certify that I have explained the nature and purpose of this research, including benefits, risks, costs, and procedures. I have described the rights and protections afforded to human subjects and have not pressured, coerced, or pressured the participant into participating. I am aware of the obligations under state and federal laws, and promise compliance.

Signature _____ Date _____

Should you have any questions, please direct them to the project researcher, Amy Abbott (alabbott@odu.edu) or the Darden College of Education IRB committee chair, Dr. Ed Gomez (edgomez@odu.edu.)

***Return Procedure:**

Please send this form in a secured Pony envelope to: Amy Abbott (GRT) at Green Run Collegiate.

~Old Dominion University~
 Secondary Participant Consent Form
 (Field Observations Only)

Project Title:

Alternative Assessment and Accountability: A Phenomenological Case Study on the Effects of Policy Reform and Teacher Practice at the District Level

Introduction:

The intention with this form is to provide detailed information that may affect your decision to participate in this research study. This form also serves as a record of consent for individuals who agree to serve as participants. The purpose of this research is to explore your experiences with locally developed, alternative social studies assessments designed to supplant standardized measures.

Description of Research Study:

Based on the 2014 legislature to remove select SOL tests, the purpose of this dissertation study is to explore how changes in assessment policy have impacted educational practice. With regard to the task of preparing students for intermittent, performance-based assessments, this study will document how stakeholders have made the adaption.

Should you decide to participate, you will serve as a participant during an observation session. The primary researcher will serve as a non-participant and take detailed field notes with regard to the actions and communication that occur.

Exclusionary Criteria:

Eligible participants must be currently involved in the implementation of locally developed alternative assessments for social studies in grade six or seven.

Risks and Benefits:

There are no foreseeable risks to you as a participant. There are no direct benefits for participation, however, the results may contribute to professional growth and amend locally developed assessments to best meet the educational needs of teachers and students. The researcher will provide you with a copy of the research results at the conclusion of the study upon request.

Confidentiality:

Any information you provide for this research study will be treated confidentially and kept in a password protected program on a computer in a private office. All data will be immediately destroyed at the conclusion of the study. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications; however, no individually identifiable information (i.e., name, school, third-parties) will be presented.

Withdrawal Privilege:

Your participation in this research is strictly voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. Your decision would not affect the relationship with the researcher or result in any negative consequences.

Voluntary Consent:

By signing this form, you are saying that you have read and understand the research study procedures presented to you in this form.

I, (print full name) _____, have read and understand the foregoing information explaining the purpose of this research and my rights and responsibilities as a participant. My signature below designates my consent to participate in this research, according to the terms and conditions listed above.

Signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's Statement:

I, _____, certify that I have explained the nature and purpose of this research, including benefits, risks, costs, and procedures. I have described the rights and protections afforded to human subjects and have not pressured, coerced, or pressured the participant into participating. I am aware of the obligations under state and federal laws, and promise compliance.

Signature _____ Date _____

Should you have any questions, please direct them to the project researcher, Amy Abbott (alabbott@odu.edu) or the Darden College of Education IRB committee chair, Dr. Ed Gomez (edgomez@odu.edu.)

***Return Procedure:**

Please send this form in a secured Pony envelope to: Amy Abbott (GRT) at Green Run Collegiate.

Appendix B
Demographic Sheet

Name:

Please state your current position:

Briefly summarize your job description:

How many years have you been in your current position?

Please provide the number of years of you’ve taught, and the positions and districts you’ve served in throughout your educational career.

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Interview Procedure:

1. IRB Exempt Status
2. VBCPS Research Committee Approval
3. Contact Eligible Participants via Email
4. Administer Informed Consent via Email
5. Schedule Convenient Interview Times
6. Conduct Interviews in Natural Setting (i.e., school, central office)

Pre-Interview Discussion:

“Thank you for allowing me to interview you today. I’d like to remind you that the overall purpose of this study is to explore how changes in assessment policy impact educational practice.

I invite you to speak freely and openly when responding to questions or prompts. Know that today’s interview will be audio-recorded and the recordings will be destroyed upon transcription. I’d also like to remind you that everything said is strictly confidential; absolutely no names or identifying information will be shared. Should you feel uncomfortable at any time, you may remove yourself from the interview.”

“OK, let’s go ahead and get started.”

(Semi-Structured, Individual Interview Questions with Teachers—Initial Interviews)

Individual Questions:

- Can you describe for me:
 - 1) how you perceive your role as the teacher in the social studies classroom?
 - 2) your goals for the teaching and learning of social studies?
- When you think about alternative assessment, what comes to mind?
- Can you describe the major differences between your experiences with Standards of Learning Testing and the new alternative assessments?
- What does the implementation of the district generated, performance-based assessments look like in your classroom?
- How do students prepare for the performance-based assessments?
- Can you describe any ways this policy reform has affected your practice?
- Describe for me any supports that you have received/are receiving.
- What does the scoring process look like?
- In what ways are students’ scores used, if at all?
- Is there anything else related to this topic you’d like to share today?

(Semi-Structured, Individual Interview Questions with Teachers—Follow-Up Interviews)

Individual Questions:

- Since we last met, have there been any changes regarding:
 - ...implementation of district-generated, performance-based assessments in your classroom?
 - ...students' preparation for the performance-based assessments?
 - ...the ways in which policy reform has affected your practice?
 - ...supports that you have received/are receiving?
 - ...the scoring process?
 - ...the ways in which students' scores are used?
- Is there anything else related to this topic you'd like to share today?

(Semi-Structured, Focus Group Interview Questions with Teachers):

- In your opinion, how has the policy reform affected teaching and learning in social studies?
 - How do your initial reactions compare to your perceptions now?
- Can you tell me about any benefits or successes you have experienced in your practice?
- Describe any of the challenges you have encountered in your practice.
- How are students responding to the alternative assessments?
- What future changes might you anticipate?
- Is there anything else related to this topic you would like to share?

(Semi-Structured, Follow-Up Questions for Central Office Personnel—Post-Pilot Study)

- If I were to look at a timeline for the steps involved in this school year, in comparison to last year, what might it look like (e.g., performance-tasks, professional development)?
- Since the performance-based assessments have been enacted, what feedback have you received (e.g., teachers, administrators, Superintendent, the state)?
- With regard to alternative assessment in this district, where is the emphasis (content? skills? Both?)
- Can you describe what teachers' accountability looks like?
- What support, if any, is the district receiving this year (e.g., regional, state)?
- Can you share any future changes you anticipate (e.g., district's plan, regional collaboration, state legislation)?

Probing Questions:

Negative Case Analysis-

In your opinion, what might prevent?

Critical Incident Technique (CIT)-

What were your intentions with....?

Can you tell me more about ____?

How is the importance of ____ related to ____?

Why might ____ be important in the situation of _____?

"I'd like you to know the next steps in the process. First, I will take this recording home to transcribe the interview. As I mentioned, your identity and any mention of third parties will

remain completely confidential. When I'm finished I will destroy this recording to maintain confidentiality.

Next, I will send the transcript to you to look over and confirm that what I've transcribed is a true representation of our interview. At that time you may choose to respond with any further elaboration on a topic of discussion, especially if there was anything you wanted to add after our interview.

"Thank you for your time in allowing me to conduct this interview. I will be in touch."

[End session]

Appendix D

Contact Summary Sheet (Blank)

Contact Summary Sheet

Interviewee:	Contact Date:	Today's Date:
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Keywords:

Main Issues or Potential Themes:

Potential Discrepancies: None at this time.

Salient, Interesting, or Important:

Follow-up Questions:

Comparison to Other Data Collections:

Appendix E

Field Note Template (Blank)

Field Note Template (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003)

Date:

Time of Observation:

Location:

Observer:

Facts & Details at the Field Site	Observer Comments
Descriptions of physical setting Spatial information Participant information Sensory impressions Routines & patterns Transitions between activities	Reflection/Details of the Setting:
Chronological Order:	

Amy L. Abbott

Department of Teaching and Learning-Curriculum & Instruction alabbott@odu.edu
 Old Dominion University, 145 Ed Building 757-437-0991 (mobile)
 Norfolk, VA 23529

EDUCATION:

Old Dominion University , Norfolk, VA <i>Ph.D.</i> , Curriculum and Instruction	Summer 2016
National Board Certified Teacher (NBPTS) <i>Generalist: Middle Childhood</i>	December 2013
University of Virginia , Charlottesville, VA <i>Gifted Education Endorsement</i>	May 2012
Old Dominion University , Norfolk, VA <i>M.S.</i> , Secondary Education	May 2009
University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh , Oshkosh, WI <i>B.S.</i> , Elementary Education, grades 1-6	May 2002

DISSERTATION:

Committee Chair:	Dr. Brandon Butler, Assistant Professor
Committee Members:	Dr. Jamie Colwell, Assistant Professor
	Dr. Steve Myran, Associate Professor

Alternative Assessment and Accountability: A Case Study of Policy Reform and Teacher Practice at the District Level

Deliberations on the topic of alternatives to standardized assessments spurred the 2014 Virginia General Assembly legislation (House Bill 930/Senate Bill 306) that removed five, end-of-year Virginia Standards of Learning tests from select elementary and middle school subjects and supplant them with alternative measures (Virginia Department of Education, 2014). The purpose of this dissertation is to develop a descriptive account of one large Virginia school district's implementation of alternative, locally developed assessments designed as an intervention to enhance teaching and learning. The theoretical framework, adapted from Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), offers a conceptual stance through which to view the formed relationships between educational systems (i.e., state, district, and classroom) acting upon student learning. Using phenomenological analysis within case study, this research follows sixth/seventh grade social studies teachers and district leaders through their enactment of performance-based tasks as formative means of assessment. Through extensive individual and focus group interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, explanation of how alternative assessment reform influences teachers' perceptions and educational practice is shared.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE:

- 2014-Present **Graduate Teaching Assistant**, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA
Department of Teaching and Learning
- TLED 301 Foundations of Education and Assessment
Fall 2014, Spring 2015, Fall 2015, Spring 2016
- 2002-Present **Teacher**, Virginia Beach Public Schools, Virginia Beach, VA
- Gifted Resource Teacher (Grades 9-11)**, Green Run Collegiate/
International Baccalaureate Charter School, 2014-Present
- Gifted Resource Teacher (Grades 6-8)**, Great Neck Middle School,
2011-2014
- Gifted Resource Teacher (Grades K-5)**, Kingston Elementary School,
2010-2011
- Teacher (Grade 6-Mathematics)**, Great Neck Middle School, 2008-2010
- Teacher (Grade 5)**, Malibu Elementary School, 2002-2008

RESEARCH:**ARTICLES**

- Abbott, A. & Wren, D. (2016). Using performance task data to improve instruction. Submitted to *The Clearing House*.
- Abbott, A. (2016). Chemical connections: A problem-based learning, STEM-based experience. *Science Scope*.
- Abbott, A. (2015). Assessing college and career readiness skills in elementary school. *Virginia Educational Leadership* 12, 56-72.

ARTICLES UNDER REVIEW

- Abbott, A. (under review). Fostering student interest development: An engagement intervention. Submitted to *Middle School Journal*.
- Abbott, A. (under review). Locally developed performance assessments: One state's decision to supplant standardized tests with alternative measures. Submitted to *The Journal of Organizational and Educational Leadership*.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

- Wren, D. G., Zahner, D., Abbott, A. L. (2016, June). *Closing the engagement gap: An analysis of student effort and engagement on large-scale performance assessments*. Symposium at the Chief Council of Chief State School Officers Conference, Philadelphia, PA.
- Abbott, A. L. (2016, April). *Alternative assessment and accountability: A phenomenological case study on the effects of policy reform and teacher practice at the district level*. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association. Washington, D.C.
- Butler, B. M., Abbott, A. L., & Diacopoulos, M. M. (2016, April). *Cultivating the C3 framework: Pre-service teachers' views of inquiry-based practice in an elementary social studies methods course*. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association. Washington, D.C.
- Diacopoulos, M. M., Abbott, A., & Butler, B. M. (2015, November). *Putting inquiry into practice: How pre-service teachers' views and experiences influence their understanding of the C3 Framework*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the College and University Faculty Assembly of the National Council for the Social Studies. New Orleans, LA.
- Abbott, A., & Wren, D. (2015, October). *Performance Tasks or Multiple-Choice Tests: Analyzing Students' Preferences*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Consortium for Research on Educational Assessment and Teaching Effectiveness (CREATE), Charleston, SC.
- Abbott, A. (2015, October). *Locally Developed Assessments: A Decision to Supplant Standardized Tests with Alternative Tasks*. Poster presented at the annual meeting of the Consortium for Research on Educational Assessment and Teaching Effectiveness (CREATE), Charleston, SC.
- Abbott, A. (2015, October). *Conceptual development of sustainability: Seminar, simulation, and debate*. Presentation at the biennial meeting of the Virginia Association of the Gifted Conference, Richmond, VA.
- Abbott, A. (2015, April). *College and career readiness for every student: One district's action plan*. Paper presented at annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL.
- Abbott, A. (2015, April). *Locally developed assessments: A response to state assessment policy reform*. Paper presented at annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL.
- Abbott, A., & Sullivan, M. (2015, March). *Implementing service learning with gifted students*. Presentation at the annual meeting of the National Curriculum Network Conference, Williamsburg, VA.

Sullivan, M., & Abbott, A. (2015, March). *Beyond AP and honors: One high school's approach to meeting the needs of the gifted*. Presentation at the annual meeting of the National Curriculum Network Conference, Williamsburg, VA.

Abbott, A., & Wren, D. (2014, October). *The integrated performance task: A test worth teaching to*. Presentation at the annual meeting of the Consortium for Research on Educational Assessment and Teaching Effectiveness (CREATE), Williamsburg, VA.

Abbott, A. (2014, September). *Identity and talent development: focusing on the whole child*. Presentation at the annual meeting of the International Holistic Teaching Conference, Ashland, Oregon.

Abbott, A. (2013, November). *Fostering talent development: The schoolwide enrichment model*. Presentation at the Virginia Association for the Gifted Conference, Williamsburg, VA.

MANUSCRIPTS IN PROGRESS

Abbott, A. L., Diacopoulos, M. M., & Butler, B. M. *Putting inquiry into practice: How pre-service teachers' views and experiences influence their understanding of the C3 Framework*.

CREATIVE CONTRIBUTIONS OTHER THAN FORMAL PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

2014	Speaker , Virginia Beach TV- Title: <i>Formative Assessment Series</i>
2012-2014	Coordinator & Team Manager , Destination Imagination

PROFESSIONAL TRAINING AND WORKSHOPS:

2016	Presenter , Annual Tidewater Community College Learning Institute, <i>Navigating the Spaces of Formative and Summative Assessment in the Higher Education Classroom</i>
2015	Speaker , National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) Workshop for Advanced Candidates, Southeastern Virginia (SEVA) NBCT Regional Network
2014	District-Wide Professional Development , Portsmouth City Public Schools. Training for middle and high school teachers on performance/problem-based instruction.
2009-2014	District-Wide Professional Development , Virginia Beach Public Schools.

Training for elementary to secondary teachers on:

- Balanced assessments (e.g., pre-assessments, formative and summative assessments, differentiation, feedback, performance tasks, and rubric development), 2012-2013;
- Problem-based learning, 2012-2013;
- Problem-based learning and data-driven improvement planning, 2012-2013;
- Division Integrated Performance Task, Critical Thinking, 2011-2012; and
- Cooperative learning in secondary math, 2009.

HONORS AND AWARDS:

2014	Most Supportive Professor Award , Pi Beta Phi, Old Dominion University
2014	Finalist , Division Teacher of the Year, Virginia Beach Public Schools
2014	Teacher of the Year , Great Neck Middle School, Virginia Beach Public Schools

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS:

American Educational Research Association, 2013-present
 Division H- Research, Evaluation, and Assessment in Schools
 Problem-Based Learning Special Interest Group
 Classroom Assessment Special Interest Group

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2013-present

Virginia Association for the Gifted, 2011-present

SERVICE:

Journal Review Service (2016)

2016 Ad Hoc Reviewer: *Science Scope Journal*

Old Dominion University (2014-Present)

2015 Undergraduate Admissions Interview Panel Member, Darden College of Education

Virginia Beach Public Schools (2002-Present)

2015	Assistant Supervisor of Districtwide Integrated Performance Task Scoring Cadre
2012-Present	Development Committee, Integrated Performance Task
2014	5-Year Gifted Plan Development Committee
2012-2013	Middle School STEM Curriculum Writing Committee
2011-2013	Gifted Placement and Identification Committee
2009-2010	Secondary Mathematics Vertical Planning Curriculum Committee
2007	Elementary Science Curriculum Revision Committee

COMMUNITY SERVICE:

2014	Virginia Beach Community Compass to 2020 Showcase Event, Presentation: <i>Focusing on a Sustainable Future</i>
2013-2014	<i>Project STING</i> (Student Talent and Interest Groups) Facilitator/Coordinator of service learning projects with middle school gifted students