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Indiana teachers' perspectives on testing accommodations for limited English proficient students taking the graduation qualifying exam

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INDIANA TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON TESTING ACCOMMODATIONS FOR LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT STUDENTS TAKING THE GRADUATION QUALIFYING EXAM

by

Angela Dawn Hetler

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in
Educational Policy and Leadership Studies
in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

December 2010

Thesis Supervisor: Professor David B. Bills

ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study examines teachers' perspectives on testing accommodations for Limited English Proficient (LEP) students taking Indiana's Graduation Qualifying Exam (GQE). The Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) states that the purpose of testing accommodations is to "level the playing field" between LEP students and their non-LEP peers. If the IDOE intends a "level playing field" to be a situation of equity in testing, several years of recent test scores show that accommodations have failed to assist LEP students to achieve on par with their peers in both English/Language Arts and Mathematics.

The 14 teachers from Grant High School in Midfield, Indiana, who participated in this study, shared in individual interviews about how and whether testing accommodations can provide the solution for closing the performance gap between LEP and non-LEP students. Teachers discussed their experiences using testing accommodations both in the classroom and during GQE testing. They also shared their perspectives on the statewide testing system and offered suggestions on how to improve the testing situation, specifically for LEP students.

Teachers were cautiously supportive of the practice of using testing accommodations, and were against implementing a high-stakes test with enough importance to determine whether students qualify for graduation. Most interviewees perceived testing accommodations as a "necessary evil," a tool that helps LEP students, but not the panacea for creating equity in testing for LEP learners.

Teachers' internal struggles to balance mandates from the State while, at the same time, preserving unique teaching practices came forth in these interviews. This conflict came to light when teachers discussed how they must adhere to IDOE practices, such as offering testing accommodations, even though they perceived accommodations as inadequate to significantly raise test scores.

Teachers generally reflected the wariness of scholars who warn against implementing a system of accommodations that, although widespread, has yet to be proved scientifically sound. Without further research into the effectiveness of testing accommodations and the benefits of exit exams, schools like Grant will continue administering high-stakes tests to all demographics of students without possessing a firm understanding of the process.

Abstract Approved: _____
Thesis Supervisor

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The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

Angela Dawn Hetler

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Educational Policy and Leadership Studies at the December 2010 graduation.

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Carolyn Colvin

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Marcus Haack

Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the 'the practice of freedom,' the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

Paulo Freire
Pedagogy of the Oppressed

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

The Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) spends approximately $442 million annually, or more than 5% of its yearly budget, for high school students to take Indiana's exit test,[1] the Graduation Qualifying Exam (GQE; Center on Education Policy [CEP], 2003, "State High School Exit Exams Put to the Test," p. 53). Despite the substantial financial investment, certain cohorts of students continue to struggle every year to pass the exam, including students who are Limited English Proficient (LEP)[2]. There are reportedly 42,632 LEP students statewide, comprising a little more than 4% of Indiana's total student population (StateMaster.com). In spite of local educators' efforts to allocate state funding in ways to best serve LEP students, LEP students' test scores still trail those of their peers. This performance gap exists even though LEP students may utilize more state funding dollars than other students by taking advantage of after-school tutoring opportunities and other remediation programs designed by their instructors for specific LEP language needs. In contrast, many general education students have little or no need to enroll in additional programs to help them pass the GQE.

Educators spend the bulk of the $442 million earmarked for the GQE at the local level. These expenditures consist of remediation programs (29%), which include after-school programs for students; special tutoring classes and summer school opportunities; prevention costs (28%) to revise instructional programs in reading and mathematics and to develop strategies to better serve special education students and LEP students;

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[1] With few exceptions, students must pass what is called an "exit exam" in order to receive a high school diploma, notwithstanding whether they have satisfactorily completed all necessary coursework.

[2] The term *LEP*, or *Limited English Proficient*, refers to a student from a non-English speaking or immigrant family who scores low in English (Rossell, 2005). Other terms, *ELL (English Language Learner)*, *ENL (English as a New Language)*, or *ESL (English as a Second Language)* also describe this category of student. For my research, I will use the term *LEP* to refer to such persons. However, I may use alternate terms when citing sources.

professional development opportunities (25%) to aid teachers' understanding of standard-based tests and to help them provide better instruction; testing (18%), including the costs of tests as well as the expenses to develop and disseminate test information; and other costs (1%)[3] (CEP, 2003, "State High School Exit Exams Put to the Test," p. 52).

Despite an overall expense of $444 per high school student for the GQE, Indiana students still place lower than most states in a national ranking of students who pass their state's exit exams on the first try (CEP, 2003, "State High School Exit Exams Put to the Test," p. 49). Minority students, students with disabilities, special education students, and LEP students average lower pass rates than their peers (CEP, 2003, "State High School Exit Exams Put to the Test," p. 52).

The IDOE grants LEP students the right to use testing accommodations[4] on the GQE to enhance student performance. The IDOE contends that testing accommodations "level the playing field" in the test-taking situation between LEP students and non-LEP peers. For this study, I interviewed 14 Indiana high school teachers who worked with LEP students daily and asked them questions about testing accommodations, including whether and how testing accommodations "level the playing field" in the test-taking situation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine high school teachers' perspectives on state-approved testing accommodations for LEP students on the GQE. The IDOE states that the purpose of testing accommodations is to "level the playing field" between LEP students and their non-LEP peers (IDOE, 2006, ISTEP+ Program Manual, 2006-2007). I asked educators several questions during the interviews: to share their perspectives about the current testing system, to discuss specific testing accommodations they employ in the

[3] Due to rounding, percentages do not add up to 100%.

[4] The Center for Equity and Excellence in Education (CEEE) at George Washington University defined accommodations as "any change to a test or testing situation that addresses a unique need of the student but does not alter the construct being measured" (CEEE, 2007).

classroom, and to disclose experiences with students who use accommodations on the GQE. Moreover, I solicited teachers to comment on the language in the testing manual: What does the term "to level the playing field" mean to them? Do teachers think this term holds a different meaning for state-level educators? Finally, I asked teachers to share ideas about how and whether testing accommodations can provide the solution for closing the performance gap, and, importantly, to offer suggestions on how to improve the current testing system.

Setting of the Study

The teachers who participated in this study taught at Grant High School in Midfield, Indiana.[5] Midfield is one of the largest cities in the state, with an urban school enrollment of nearly 22,000 students (Swanson, 2001). The city's population tops 108,000 residents living within the city limits. Of the 12% of the residents who speak another language besides English, 62% speak Spanish. Those who identify as Hispanic are 8.5% of Midfield's population (6.6% identify as Mexican); members of this cohort tend to speak English and/or Spanish (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Grant High School is one of four high schools in Midfield. In 2006-2007, 1644 students were enrolled in Grades 9 through 12. In 2006, 265 students graduated, with a school graduation rate of 69.4% (IDOE Website, 2007). Grant's graduation rate is competitive with the other three Midfield high schools, which had graduation rates of 71.8%, 65.9%, and 70.0% (IDOE Website, 2007).

Grant's ethnic make-up in 2006-2007 consisted of 45% White, 38% Black[6], 13% Hispanic, and 4% multiracial, Native American, and Asian students combined. Grant's percentages have fluctuated within the past 10 years. Since 1996-1997, the Black student

[5] Both the names *Grant* and *Midfield* are pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

[6] IDOE calls United States' students of African heritage "Black" rather than "African-American." For this study, I have chosen to follow IDOE's example and refer to this cohort as "Black".

population has increased by 36% and Hispanics by 11%. Whites have decreased by 25%. The numbers of multiracial, Native American, and Asian students have remained fairly consistent (IDOE Website, 2007).

Other high schools in Midfield have also grown in minority populations. The minority population of one west side high school has increased by 33% in 10 years (IDOE Website, 2007). All of the bilingual Hispanics who attend that high school are Level 5[7] LEP students. The lower-level LEP students from the west side school district who are ranked at Levels 1 through 4 (beginning to intermediate speakers) are bussed to Grant High School to enroll in LEP classes with other LEP students from all four high schools[8]. The centralized LEP program makes Grant a melting pot for LEP learners. Even with all the LEP students (Levels 1-4) from the entire city bussed to Grant, only one classroom LEP teacher per level is needed. This translates into four high school LEP teachers in the Midfield school corporation that serve the entire LEP student body.

For this study, in addition to interviewing the four LEP teachers, I interviewed three mathematics teachers, three English/language arts teachers, and four Spanish teachers. All teachers were willing participants whose contributions were an invaluable part of the success of this study.

Historical Background

The GQE is a type of exit exam. The test scores not only afford students a way to satisfy graduation qualification requirements but also provide the requisite data that Indiana education officials are required to send to the U.S. Department of Education to show Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in keeping with federal regulations of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Although NCLB does not require states to adopt high

[7] Level 5 LEP students are highly proficient to fluent speakers of English.

[8] All LEP students take the Language Assessment Skills Links test (LAS Links test) to determine their level of language skill. The levels range from 1 to 5, Level 1 being the beginning stage of English language acquisition and Level 4 near language fluency. Level 5 students are mainstreamed.

school exit exams, states may choose to do so and then use test scores to show AYP. West Ed[9] wrote: "These exams, which students must pass to graduate, are part of state accountability systems, above and beyond the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001" (West Ed, 2003, p. 3).

Indiana students take the GQE in the fall semester of their sophomore year. The test covers end-of-ninth-grade English/Language Arts skills, plus end of Pre-Algebra and Algebra 1 mathematics skills (CEP, 2006, "State High School Exit Exams: A Challenging Year"). The GQE is a component of the statewide accountability testing system titled *Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress Plus* (*ISTEP+)*. The first comprehensive statewide assessment test in Indiana under the "ISTEP" name began in 1988 after the 1987 state legislature passed it into law (1988 *ISTEP* Manual; IDOE, 1988). In 1996, the IDOE revamped the *ISTEP* into the *ISTEP+*; the *Plus* denotes the advent of the GQE test, along with the addition of open-ended response items (IDOE, 2004). In the same year, the IDOE decided to administer testing in the fall (moving it from spring) to allow students to benefit from test remediation during the course of the school year[10] (IDOE Website, 2007). In 1997, the sophomore class of 2000 was the first to take the GQE and be required to meet the Indiana Academic Standards in order to qualify for a high school diploma (CEP, 2005, "State High School Exit Exams: States Try Harder but Gaps Persist").

In 2000, the Indiana State Board of Education implemented the Indiana Academic Standards "that represent learning outcomes deemed necessary for successful performances in school, at work, and in the community" (IDOE Website, 2007). Students must demonstrate mastery of the Indiana Academic Standards tested on the GQE in order to qualify for a diploma (IDOE, 2006, ISTEP+ Program Manual, 2006-

[9] *West Ed* is a non-profit education agency headquartered in San Francisco, CA.

[10] Test scores are reported to districts, schools, students, parents, and the public one and a half months after testing occurs (CEP, 2005, "State High School Exit Exams: States Try Harder but Gaps Persist").

2007). In other words, if students are unable to pass the GQE, they still may be able to graduate, as long as they can show mastery of the Academic Standards.

All high school students have five chances to take and to pass the GQE during their regular high school tenure. The first opportunity is in September of their sophomore year, and then every subsequent March and September until the end of their senior year. If students choose, they may continue to take the exam after they have completed their high school course work, although many opt for the alternate assessment so they can graduate with their peer group (CEP, 2006, "State High School Exit Exams: A Challenging Year").

Students who do not pass the GQE have another option for showing mastery of the Indiana Academic Standards.[11] Students may be eligible to graduate if they do the following:

1. Take the graduation exam in each subject in which they failed to achieve a passing score at least one time every school year after the school year in which they first took the exam.
2. Complete remediation opportunities provided by their school.
3. Maintain a school attendance rate of at least 95%, with excused absences not counting against attendance.
4. Maintain at least a C average or the equivalent in the courses specifically required for graduation.
5. Obtain a written recommendation from their teachers in each subject area in which they did not achieve a passing score. The school principal must concur with the recommendation. The recommendation also must be supported by documentation that the student has attained the academic standard in the subject area based on classroom work or tests other than the graduation exam.

[11] This "option" is sometimes referred to as the "waiver process" (IDOE, 2007).

6. Otherwise satisfy all state and local graduation requirements (IDOE, 2006, ISTEP+ Program Manual, 2006-2007; CEP, 2005, “State High School Exit Exams: States Try Harder but Gaps Persist”).

A History of Testing Accommodations for LEP Students on the GQE

When the ISTEP was introduced in 1988, the GQE was not a component of the testing program. High school students took a ninth grade achievement test and later an eleventh grade test. High school graduation was not contingent upon students passing these tests, as is presently the case with the GQE.

Testing accommodations for LEP students did not exist for the 1988 ISTEP exams. Instead, an LEP student could become exempt from the test by reading 2 years below grade level or if the student "speaks with hesitancy, understands with difficulty, barely converses, understands only parts of some lessons, cannot understand and follow simple directions, cannot write without fundamental error" (IDOE, 1988, p. 7). LEP students that were judged by educators to meet these criteria could qualify for a waiver with the signature of the principal, which thereby exempted them from the test. If they did not qualify for a waiver, they took the exam (IDOE, 1988, ISTEP Program Manual, 1988), and rather than provide testing accommodations, the IDOE focused on remediation strategies for LEP students:

> Remediation should be targeted to the development of English language skills through English as a second language instruction beginning with the student's current level of proficiency. Concepts already known in the student's native language will transfer to English once the vocabulary is known and understood. (IDOE, 1988, p. E-2)

Although the IDOE did not provide testing accommodations for LEP students in 1988, they offered "special adaptations" to other groups of students with testing needs. The IDOE made provisions for blind students to take the test in Braille or to use enlarged versions of the test, as well as allowing extra test time and assistance for "students with a temporary disablement, such as a broken arm, or a chronic disability, such as cerebral

palsy" (IDOE, 1988, I-2). LEP students, however, were excluded from these accommodations.

Educators first administered the GQE to sophomores in 1997. These students were under a mandate to pass the exam by the time they graduated in 2000. In a descriptive guide about the newly introduced GQE published by the IDOE in 1998, the IDOE made no mention of provisions to assist students with special testing needs. Instead, the IDOE promoted remediation opportunities as a strategy for success for special needs students at the local level:

> Remedial assistance is required for all students who don't meet the academic standards required to pass the 10th grade Graduation Qualifying Exam. The type of assistance is determined by the student's school system....If you have questions about this, please contact your local school. (IDOE, 1998, p. 5)

In the years following the first GQE test (1997), the IDOE began offering testing accommodations for special education students, students with disabilities, and LEP students. They pledged:

> Since the purpose of testing accommodations is to 'level the playing field' and not to provide either an unfair advantage or a disadvantage to a student who takes a test with accommodations, the Department of Education will study the impact of accommodations on test results in order to minimize any unintended effects. (IDOE, 2000, p. 49)

It is uncertain the extent to which the IDOE has studied the effectiveness of testing accommodations for special needs students because they have not published any findings. If the IDOE has studied testing accommodations, this information remains unavailable to the public. What is clear, however, is that the IDOE has continued to include accommodations as a permanent component of the GQE since the early 2000s. The IDOE's definition of the purpose of accommodations has changed slightly over the past few years. In 2006, the IDOE wrote: "The purpose of testing accommodations is to 'level the playing field,' or to achieve parity with non-disabled, non-language deficient peers in the test-taking situation" (IDOE, 2006, p. 53). In 2009 they wrote, "Testing accommodations are designed to 'level the playing field' during the testing situation or to

achieve 'assessment parity' for all students regardless of disability or language deficiency" (IDOE, 2009, p. 50).

Despite the alteration in definition, the IDOE has sanctioned the same list of testing accommodations for LEP students over the past several years. If the IDOE has evaluated the merits of these accommodations, the results have not been made public.

Exit Exams and Graduation

Non-traditional students (such as those with disabilities and in LEP programs) are less likely than their traditional White counterparts to earn a high school diploma. According to Christopher Swanson at the Urban Institute, a little more than one-half of students from historically disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups finish high school. In high-poverty urban areas in big cities, as few as one-third of the high school students graduate (Swanson, 2004). Some non-traditional students, such as students with disabilities, may qualify for a certificate in place of a diploma if they stay in school instead of dropping out. In Indiana, students with disabilities may be eligible for a Certificate of Completion[12] instead of a diploma, which may be appropriate according to the nature of the disability (IDOE, 2006, ISTEP+ Program Manual, 2006-2007). LEP students, however, have fewer choices for graduation than students with disabilities. In January 2006, the Center on Education Policy (CEP), an independent non-profit organization that conducts research on state exit exams, released the results of a comprehensive study on the 25 states that presently require exit exams.[13] They found that "alternate paths to graduation for LEPS are far less common than those for students with disabilities" (CEP, 2006, "State High School Exit Exams: States Try Harder but

[12] The Certificate of Completion is not an academic credential, but it does allow for students to participate in school graduation events and other school-sponsored ceremonies.

[13] The 211-page report is called, *State High School Exit Exams: A Challenging Year*, and can be found on the CEP webpage at: www.cep.org

Gaps Persist“). Without alternate paths, many LEP students must rely on testing accommodations in order to pass the exam and to qualify for a high school diploma.

"Leveling the Playing Field"

The IDOE wrote, "Testing accommodations are designed to 'level the playing field' during the testing situation or to achieve 'assessment parity' for all students regardless of disability or language deficiency" (IDOE, 2009, ISTEP+ Program Manual 2009-2010). The IDOE considers the act of "leveling the playing field" and creating "assessment parity" to be mutual terms, and offers no further explanation of these expressions. The meaning remains vague apparently because of lack of definition. Does the IDOE intend for testing accommodations to be the cure in testing; the panacea designed to create equitable test scores among all groups of learners? Or is the IDOE satisfied to claim that the testing procedure is fair because they allow sanctioned testing accommodations? In other words, is the presence of accommodations enough to “level the playing field” in the mind of the IDOE? How do teachers interpret the term "level playing field"?

The IDOE is not alone in using the term "level playing field." Tindal and Fuchs, in their analysis of testing accommodations for special education students wrote, "Accommodations are changes in standardized assessment conditions introduced to ‘level the playing field’ for students" (Tindal & Fuchs, 2000, p. 8). The CEP wrote, "Accommodations are intended to 'level the playing field' - that is, to make language less of a factor when measuring performance" (Center on Education Policy, 2005, p. 96).

The lack of definition makes the term “level playing field” vague in meaning (even though educators sometimes use the expression when discussing the purpose of testing accommodations for non-traditional students.) Even so, it is irresponsible to accept testing accommodations as the remedy for testing inequities (if this is the IDOE’s intention) since once there is a “cure,” there is no need to accept that there is a problem.

It is equally careless to promote the idea that a "level playing field" exists in testing simply because accommodations are available as part of the testing procedure.

Test Scores

GQE scores in recent years have shown that testing accommodations have not succeeded in closing the performance gap. If the IDOE intends "a level the playing field" to lead to equity among test scores, accommodations are not the panacea that state-level educators and policymakers hoped they would be.

The percentage of LEP students classified “with accommodations” who passed the language arts test in the 2006-07 academic year were 17 %, compared to 73% for General Education (GE) students (i.e., the “non-disabled, non-language deficient” students). The difference in language arts scores between the two cohorts was 56 percentage points (see Table 1).

The gap was narrower in math between LEP students who tested “with accommodations” and GE students, but it was still significant. Although 71% of GE students passed the test, only 33% of LEP students who used accommodations succeeded. The difference between the groups on the math test totaled 38 percentage points (see Table 2).

The GQE data for 2006-2007 showed that LEP students who tested with accommodations not only performed substandard to the GE students on both the English/Language Arts and Mathematics tests but also scored below advanced LEP students who did not require the use of accommodations[14] (see Tables 1 and 2).

If the IDOE intended for a "level playing field" to lead to closing the performance gap between lower-level LEP students and their peers, the gap would not be so striking.

[14] The majority of LEP students who do not use testing accommodations are advanced LEP learners who possess better mastery skills of the English language. For this reason, it may be unfair to compare students who use testing accommodations to those who do not.

As a consequence, LEP students who fail the test may be unable to qualify for a diploma and to graduate alongside their peers.

Table 1. 2006-2007 Indiana GQE Test Results on the Language Arts Exam (Test Given 9-19-2006)

Disaggregation Category	Total Number Tested	Total Number Passing	Total Percent Passing	Median Score	Lowest Score	Highest Score
All Students	80772	53587	66	573.9	220	820
Total General Ed*	70222	51391	73	580.1	220	820
ESL/LEP with Accommodations	1152	194	17	511.6	220	669
ESL/LEP w/o Accommodations	681	208	31	525.9	220	820

*LEP and special education scores not included in this category

Table 2. 2006-2007 Indiana GQE Test Results on the Mathematics Exam (Test Given 9-19-2006)

Disaggregation Category	Total Number Tested	Total Number Passing	Total Percent Passing	Median Score	Lowest Score	Highest Score
All Students	80772	52361	65	613	300	920
Total General Ed*	70222	49717	71	620.5	300	920
ESL/LEP with Accommodations	1155	377	33	558	300	766
ESL/LEP w/o Accommodations	678	275	41	571.6	300	920

*LEP and special education scores not included in this category

Testing Accommodations

The IDOE has divided testing accommodations into two groups: those accommodations which are permitted, but *not documented* (see Table 3), for student use during the exam; and accommodations that are permitted, but must be *documented* (see Table 4), as used by students during the exam (IDOE, 2006, *ISTEP*+ Program Manual, 2006-2007). The teachers of LEP students who take advantage of *not documented* accommodations are not required to submit to the state any proof that their students used accommodations. An example of a *not documented* accommodation is individual testing.

All LEP students qualify to be tested individually rather than in a group setting (IDOE, 2006, ISTEP+ Program Manual, 2006-2007). When this happens, the teacher does not need to show documentation to the state. However, if a student wants to take advantage of a *documented* accommodation, such as using a bilingual word-to-word dictionary, the teacher must submit this information to the state along with the student's exam (IDOE, 2006, ISTEP+ Program Manual, 2006-2007). In addition to these two groupings of *not documented* and *documented* accommodations, the process of using accommodations is selective. For a student to profit from a given accommodation, the student's teacher of record needs to document in the student's Individual Learning Plan (ILP) that the student qualifies to use a particular accommodation. For example, if a teacher does not write in the student's ILP that the student is approved to be tested in an isolated environment or to use a bilingual dictionary on classroom tests, the student will not be allowed to use these accommodations on the GQE (IDOE, 2006, ISTEP+ Program Manual, 2006-2007). Hence, students' ILPs play an important role in students' qualifying for testing accommodations.

Table 3. Accommodations for LEP students Levels 1-4 (permitted, but **not documented,** on the ISTEP+ *Student Information Questionnaire*)

Timing and Scheduling	Response Format	Setting and Environment	Presentation Format
• Student provided additional breaks as necessary • Test administered in several sessions • Additional breaks between tests, if necessary		• Student is tested in a small group setting • Student is tested individually	• Student has directions read to him or her • Student has test administered by a familiar test administrator

Table 4. Accommodations for LEP students Levels 1-4 (permitted, but **documented,** on the ISTEP+ *Student Information Questionnaire*)

Timing and Scheduling	Response Format	Setting and Environment	Presentation Format
• Student is provided extended testing time for each test session. (A timeframe, such as 50% more time or double time, should be set.)	• Student uses an approved word-to-word bilingual dictionary.		• All test questions are read to the student (except those that measure Reading Comprehension). • Math test items and answer options are read verbatim (in English) to student.

LEP Student Exemptions

All LEP students are required by federal law to be tested annually to determine their level of English language proficiency (IDOE, 2006, ISTEP+ Program Manual, 2006-2007). In Indiana, the LAS Links English Language Proficiency Assessment (LAS Links) is used to determine LEP students' levels of proficiency.[15] After a student's score is assessed, the student is placed in one of five levels and receives further instruction. Students who are new to the United States, have extremely limited or no English-speaking skills, and score low on the LAS Links test are placed in Level 1. Students who are fluent speakers are assigned to Level 5 and are not required to take coursework in English language acquisition.[16] Although Level 5 students are mainstreamed, they still must take the LAS Links exam each year to prove that they remain fluent in English.

LEP students who have been enrolled in U.S. schools for 1 year or more are obligated to fully participate in the ISTEP+ assessment program (IDOE, 2006, ISTEP+

[15] *LAS* stands for *Language Assessment System* and is published by McGraw-Hill.

[16] Nor are Level 5 students permitted to use testing accommodations on the GQE.

Program Manual, 2006-2007). Tenth graders must take both the mathematics and the English language arts portions of the GQE.[17] LEP students in their first year of enrollment must also take the mathematics exam, but they may substitute the LAS Links assessment for the English language arts portion of the test, provided they scored "not proficient" or "approaching proficient" on their LAS Links assessment (IDOE, 2006, ISTEP+ Program Manual, 2006-2007).

It may seem logical for the state to allow LEP students in their first year to substitute the LAS Links exam to satisfy GQE requirements in English language arts, given that LEP students are defined by their inability to speak English fluently. IDOE defines LEPs as "students whose primary language is not English" (IDOE, 2006, ISTEP+ Program Manual, 2006-2007). Therefore, it makes sense for students in their first year of study, in which the target language is English, not to be obligated to take a language arts test in that language. What does not make sense, however, is to expect students who have been studying in the United States for just over 1 year to possess all the necessary language skills to pass the English language arts portion of the GQE. Hakuta, Goto Butler, and Witt (2000), from the University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute, concluded after collecting data from four different school districts (two in California and two in Canada) that it takes several years to attain oral and academic English proficiency:

> The clear conclusion emerging from these data sets is that even in two California districts that are considered the most successful in teaching English to LEP students, oral proficiency takes 3 to 5 years to develop, and academic English proficiency can take 4 to 7 years. (Hakuta et al., 2000, i)

A considerable body of literature written by experts in the field of second language acquisition supports the theory that it takes several years to gain oral and written proficiency in a non-primary language (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1999; Milloy & Fischer,

[17] Older high school students would have to take the GQE if they had never done so or if they were still trying to pass it.

2002). Given this understanding, what is the rush to make students take a test in a language they may not be ready for?

The answer to this question may lie in schools' need to demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). AYP requires that schools achieve at or above the state-established annual measurable objectives in both mathematics and English language arts in a given year in keeping with NCLB requirements. The academic achievement goals must be met not only for the entire group of general education students, but also for specific subgroups, including LEP students (Porter, Linn, & Trimble, 2005). If a school does not make AYP, according to NCLB, it may be subjected to sanctions (Wright, 2006). Every year, each state submits AYP figures to the U.S. Department of Education, and every year, AYP goals increase as they are designed to do. The final goal for LEP students stipulated by NCLB is that by 2014, all LEPs, regardless of their level of English proficiency or amount of time spent in the United States, must pass their state's accountability tests (Porter et al., 2005; Wright, 2006). This translates into 100% English proficiency for every LEP student in the United States by 2014. With this in mind, not to mention the elimination of the LEP category in that year and given that LEPs are defined by having limited English proficiency, it is not surprising that states are feeling the need to put pressure on LEP students to learn English quickly.

Beginning English speakers are required to take the mathematics portion of the GQE. They often struggle with the math test because it contains the English language-based items. Unfortunately, LEP students' deficiency in English language arts skills can go unnoticed because they are not being evaluated in language arts. Sometimes the simplest words in English may have specialized meanings in mathematics (Bielenberg & Wong Fillmore, 2005.) Margo Gottlieb, the director of assessment and evaluation at the Illinois Resource Center, provided an example of a specialized meaning of the word *table*. Most students would associate that word with a place where they sit, not with a mathematical *table*, whose meaning they might need to know on a math test (Dillon,

2006). Although language skills are not tested on the GQE math exam, students need to use those skills to do well. The assumption is that because there are mostly numerals and equations on the math test, students do not need to be competent English speakers; this is not accurate because a good portion of the test contains directions in English and includes story problems that must be read. Here is a sample test question published on the Internet in a 2001-2002 ISTEP+ Grade 10 guide: "A telephone pole has a support wire attached to it 15 feet from the ground. The wire reaches the ground 8 feet from the base of the pole. How long is the wire?"[18] Beginning English language learners might not understand what a *support wire* is, let alone what it does. Hence the question remains: Can a simple testing accommodation, such as a bilingual dictionary, make up for this lack of understanding? And if so, what about logistical factors. Do students have enough time to look up all the words they do not know? Would they look them up if they did? Moreover, should educators expect LEP students to put more effort into taking the test by using dictionaries, for example, than they ask of their regular education students?

LEP Student Demographics

There are large numbers of LEP students in U.S. schools. An estimated 5 million were enrolled in K-12 public schools in 2003-2004, representing about 10% of the total K-12 school population. About 80% of LEPs are Spanish speakers, with Spanish being one of more than 400 languages represented (GAO, 2006). Most of the nation's LEP children live in states that require exit exams. This is largely because exit exams are most commonly found in states in the South and Southwest, which house a majority of the roughly 80% of LEPs who are Spanish speakers[19] (Amrein & Berliner, 2002).

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[18] This sample question comes from *ISTEP+ Student and Parent Guide*, http://www.gcsc.k12.in.us/~gchs/ISTEP_Assessments/Guides/isteppg10.pdf.

[19] The southern and southwestern states that presently require exit exams are: Alabama, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia (CEP, 2006 [State High School Exit Exams: A Challenging Year]).

Spanish is also the most common language, other than English, spoken by Indiana residents. The 2000 Census indicated that 6.4% of Hoosiers spoke a language other than English as their primary language (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Over half (52%) of those who spoke a language other than English spoke Spanish.

In the city of Midfield[20], where I conducted this study, 12% of the residents indicated that they spoke a language other than English, with 7.4% speaking Spanish (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). This translates into 62% of those who speak a language other than English being Spanish speakers. Midfield has a 10% higher rate of Spanish speakers than the state average. This fact seems natural since most immigrants live in urban areas, albeit larger than Midfield (Chiswick & Miller, 2004).

Why Study Testing Accommodations?

There are several persuasive arguments for studying testing accommodations for LEP students on exit exams. One is that exit exams are growing in popularity among state education systems and, hence, are emerging as a trend for the future. As of 2007, 25 states offered exit exams, with the numbers expected to increase (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). The CEP estimated that about 72% of students will attend high schools that require exit exams by the year 2012 (CEP in Dillon, 2006). None of the 25 states that have adopted exit exams has chosen to discontinue them in favor of another type of student assessment[21].

In recent years, government offices and educational research institutions have requested more information about how accommodations work and whether they are meeting educational objectives. Thus, another reason for studying testing accommodations is to respond to a call for more research on their effectiveness.

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[20] Midfield is the pseudonym I chose for this mid-sized city in northern Indiana.

[21] State adoption of exit exams began in 1979 (Amrein & Berliner, 2002).

In July 2006, the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued a report to congressional requesters naming four recommendations to the Secretary of Education on how the U.S. Department of Education could help states better serve their LEP students' educational needs. The GAO wrote:

> To help states improve their assessment of students with limited English proficiency, we are recommending that the Secretary of Education (1) support additional research on accommodations, (2) identify and provide additional technical support states need to ensure the validity and reliability of academic assessments for these students, (3) publish more detailed guidance on assessing the English language proficiency of these students, and (4) explore ways to provide additional flexibility with respect to measuring annual progress for these students. (GAO, 2006, p. 6)

The GAO's first recommendation was a call for further research on the effectiveness of accommodations. The GAO wrote that "research is lacking on what specific accommodations are appropriate for students with limited English proficiency, as well as their effectiveness in improving the validity of assessment results" (GAO, 2006, p. 31). The CEEE (2007) echoed the GAO's beliefs. They wrote that "review of accommodations studies has shown that more research must be conducted on the impact of particular accommodations or groups of accommodations on the scores of ELLs" (CEEE, 2007).

In addition to the call for more research on accommodations and the widespread use of exit exams, a more compelling reason to study testing accommodations is the immediate need to understand their value. Many state departments of education overwhelmingly support the use of accommodations despite the apparent lack of empirical evidence pointing to their effectiveness. Essentially, a growing number of states are adopting a practice that has not been proved scientifically sound. For this reason, it is important to ask the question: Why do state-level educators and policymakers maintain the position that testing accommodations are beneficial in the test-taking situation?

Why Talk to Teachers?

Teachers are the practitioners in the field of education. They work hands on with students and are the first evaluators to know whether, and to what extent, an educational practice is working. Teachers of LEP students are familiar with testing accommodations: which accommodations work well and which do not. These instructors are also present in the room while students take exit exams. For these reasons, teachers of LEP students are a helpful resource for learning more about testing accommodations, including whether and how accommodations are an effective tool for "leveling the playing field" among students in the test-taking situation.

Organization of the Study

This chapter, Chapter I, introduces an overview of the study, including a rationale for the research. Chapter II, the literature review, provides a background for understanding the relevance of the study. Chapter III consists of the methodology of the study, including data details and limitations. Chapter IV presents and examines the research findings. The concluding chapter, Chapter V, analyzes the data and discusses the findings within a framework of social foundations of education. This chapter also contains recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The literature review not only provides a background for understanding the relevance of the research study but also presents a place to discuss where and how the study contributes to the field of scholarly research. There are four major components of the literature review: examining the significance of high school exit exams including Indiana's Graduation Qualifying Exam (GQE), understanding the process of second language acquisition, investigating the history of limited English proficient (LEP) education in the United States, and exploring issues of equity in learning and test performance for LEP students.

High School Exit Exams

Exit exams are increasing in popularity within state education systems and, hence, are emerging as a trend for the future. Bhanpuri and Sexton, from the Center for Education Policy (CEP), wrote, "By 2012, approximately 72% of all American public school students will be required to take an exit exam prior to high school graduation" (Bhanpuri & Sexton, 2006, p. 1). With more states relying on exit exams than not, it is important to understand the effect of these exams on high school student graduation rates for all students, including LEP learners.

Early studies on the effects of high school exit exams on graduation rates have suggested a link, however moderate, between states who have adopted exit exams and lower graduation rates. In 2003, the CEP held a panel discussion to discuss exit exam policies and drop-out issues. The panel members included Marguerite Clarke, a research associate with the National Commission on Testing and Public Policy; Sherman Dorn, the editor of Education Policy Analysis Archives (EPAA); Phillip Kaufman, an associate with the education research firm MPR associates; Nettie Letgers, a researcher at Johns Hopkins University; Dean Lillard, an economics researcher at Cornell University; and

John Robert Warren, a leading researcher on high school exit exams at the University of Minnesota (Chudowsky & Gayler, 2003). Chudowsky and Gayler (2003) wrote, "Based on the limited empirical evidence available, the panel concluded that there is only moderately suggestive evidence, to date, of exit exams causing more students to drop out of school" (p. 6).

The panel examined studies from the early 2000s conducted by Amrein and Berliner (2002), Jacob (2001), Warren and Edwards (in CEP 2003), Carnoy and Loeb (2002), and Davenport, Davison, Kwak, Irish, and Chan (2002). Though seemingly benign, panel members cited their own studies, which raises the question of whether members were open minded about discussing these studies or pushing their own agendas. Dorn's EPAA published Amrein and Berliner's study, *High Stakes Testing, Uncertainty, and Student Learning*, and Warren is a well-published researcher and author of several articles on exit exams, including one on the panel's docket.

Amrein and Berliner examined 16 states with exit exams in 2002. They concluded that "after high school graduation exams were implemented, 67 percent of the states posted a decrease in the rate by which students were graduated from high school" (Amrein & Berliner, 2002, p. 33). Jacob, who used data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS), found that "bottom quintile students in test states are … nearly 25% more likely to drop out of high school than peers in non-test states" (Jacob, 2001, p. 114). Although Warren and Edwards found that "students who were required to pass exit exams in the early 1990s were about 70% more likely to obtain a GED instead of a regular high school diploma" (Warren & Edwards in CEP, 2003), they concluded that "high stakes graduation tests have no impact on high school dropout" (Warren & Edwards, in CEP 2003, p. 2).

Both Jacob (2001) and Warren and Edwards (in CEP 2003) used data from the NELS-88 report that focused on students who graduated from high school in 1992. One drawback to these studies is that the data were already several years old by the time the

researchers published their reports. In some instances, using older data may be acceptable, but not when discussing an ever-growing trend, such as exit exams, which can change rapidly within a few years. For example, 27 states currently employ exit exams whereas in 1992 only 16 used them. The use of NELS-88 data, which was already 10 years old by the early 2000s, is questionable in terms of being representative of the vast numbers of students whose states have since become exit exam states.

In contrast to the aforementioned researchers, Amrein and Berliner (2003) used more recent data that individual states supplied to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) maintained under the auspices of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Amrein and Berliner (2003) found that 88% of states with exit exams had higher dropout rates. Their claims caused a stir among researchers because they contradicted the findings of other contemporary studies, albeit they relied on data from a different source. Other researchers, like Marchant, Paulson, and Shunk (2006), discovered that although students who took exit exams scored higher on the SAT, they also had lower graduation rates. Despite being widely circulated, one shortcoming of this study was that it focused on only 1 year of student testing and graduation data. For this reason, Stanford educator Martin Carnoy criticized the study for containing "flawed measurement" (Viadero, 2005).

The number of studies that have specifically examined the effects of high school exit exams on graduation rates is limited; graduation exit exams are a trend that began only about 15 years ago. At this point, when it comes to high school exit exams and lower graduation rates, current research is mixed as to whether one leads to the other.

The "all or nothing" nature of exit exams is cause for concern. These exams are categorized as high-stakes standardized tests because so much is invested in whether students pass or fail. At the test-taking level, students must perform well on the dates the test is given or jeopardize the possibility of earning acceptance into college, forfeit eligibility for a scholarship, or even risk qualifying for a high school diploma. Some

states, including Indiana, make the test available to students more than one time per year. According to the IDOE, the reason for providing multiple testing opportunities is "to allow schools more flexible instructional and remedial approaches" (ISTEP+ Program Manual 2006-2007, p. 2).

All schools are mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) to show Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). AYP requires that schools achieve at or above the state-established annual measurable objectives in both mathematics and English language arts in a given year, in keeping with NCLB requirements. The academic achievement goals must be met not only for the total group of general education students but also for specific subgroups, including LEP students (Porter et al., 2005). If a school does not make AYP, according to NCLB, it may be subjected to sanctions (Wright, 2006). Every year, each state submits AYP figures to the Department of Education, and every year, AYP goals increase as they are designed to do. Schools in Indiana are invested in student test performance because the test scores are used to demonstrate that schools have made AYP. Although NCLB does not require states to adopt high school exit exams, states may choose to do so and then use test scores to show AYP. West Ed[22] wrote: "These exams, which students must pass to graduate, are part of state accountability systems, above and beyond the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001" (West Ed, 2003).

Most states that have adopted high school exit exams are located in the South and the Southwest where there are large concentrations of minority students as well as students living at or below the poverty level. Amrein and Berliner (2002) claimed that "by the year 2008, high school graduation exams will be found in 75% of the southwestern and southern states" (p. 9). Because of their locations within these states, exit exams appear to unfairly target non-white, non-traditional students, including white

[22] *West Ed* is a non profit education agency headquartered in San Francisco, CA.

students of low socio-economic status (SES). According to Amrein and Berliner (2002), “high school graduation exams are more likely to be implemented in states that have lower levels of achievement and the always present correlate of low achievement, poorer students” (p. 10).

If graduation rates are an indicator of achievement, Indiana ranks in the middle of the nation at 23 (Swanson, 2001). Christopher Swanson of the Urban League wrote that “graduation rates vary over 12 percent across the regions, with the highest graduation rates found in the Midwest (75 percent) and the lowest in the South (62 percent)” (Swanson, 2001, p. 12). In terms of poverty, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) ranks Indiana 37th in the nation for percentage of children in poverty aged 5 to 17 years (9.6%). The state is well under the national average of 15.1% (NCES, 2001-2002). Although Indiana does not fit the profile of “an exit exam state” (being neither in the South, nor among the most impoverished states), the GQE, or a similar exam, is likely to continue to be implemented given that state-level educators and policymakers remain committed to investing dollars and effort into maintaining Indiana’s exit exam.

As exit exams gain in popularity, more studies will be needed that examine the strengths and weaknesses of these exams as components of statewide assessments. The conventional research techniques of examining longitudinal educational studies and documenting drop-out rates will no doubt continue to provide invaluable data to understanding more about the effectiveness of exit exams. However, teachers' voices, as well as perspectives of other education stakeholders, have customarily been absent as a source of data to enrich the exit exam discussion. This study provides a place for those educators' voices to be heard.

Testing Accommodations

The U.S. Department of Education mandates that states offer testing accommodations for LEP students on statewide standardized tests. According to NCLB guidelines, schools must test LEP students in a "valid and reasonable manner" and

provide "reasonable accommodations" (Wright, 2006, p. 23). Because federal-level educators have not sanctioned specific accommodations for LEP students, states must decide what those accommodations should be.

The CEP reviewed all states with exit exams and published "categories of adjustments," or accommodations, in the testing situation for LEP students and students with disabilities (CEP, 2006, "State High School Exit Exams: A Challenging Year," p. 99). The categories were initially created and published by the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO), which is supported by the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education, and affiliated with the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota (Cormier, Altman, Shyyan, & Thurlow, 2010, "A Summary of the Research on the Effects of Test Accommodations: 2007-2008," p. 9). Table 5 presents the categories from the CEP report and a short description of each.

Table 5. Categories of Accommodations for Limited English Proficient Students and Students with Disabilities

Accommodations Categories	Descriptions
Setting	Adjusting the location in which a test is given or the conditions of the assessment setting
Timing / Scheduling	Increasing the time allowed to complete the test or changing how testing time is organized
Presentation	Adjusting the modes by which students access test material and / or directions.
Response	Adjusting the manner in which students are allowed to respond to test questions
Equipment / Material	Using assistive technology or instruments to facilitate students' meaningful participation

The CEP conducted a study to describe and categorize the accommodations states permit for LEP students and students with disabilities. The CEP found that presentation

accommodations were the most prevalent in the states that they surveyed for both LEP students and students with disabilities:

> For ELLs, presentation accommodations often involve language aids, such as having someone read aloud the test directions or questions in English, translating directions into the student's native language, or allowing students to use word-to-word dictionaries to help them understand the material. (CEP, 2006, "State High School Exit Exams: A Challenging Year," p. 99)

Accommodations in setting as well as in timing / scheduling were also cited frequently in the CEP survey. The CEP found that setting accommodations often included "individual or small group administration of the exams or testing in a separate location" (CEP, 2006, "State High School Exit Exams: A Challenging Year," p. 99). Extended testing time, extra breaks and giving the test in several sessions were typical of the time / setting accommodations.

The NCEO, which houses a large electronic database of articles on the study of testing accommodations for students with disabilities, including disabled and non-disabled LEP students, conducted a different type of assessment[23]. Using the same accommodations categories as the CEP, they evaluated 60 studies[24] to determine where each one fit into the five accommodations categories, then listed the number of studies for each category. Table 6 presents the NCEO data by percentage of studies under each category.

The NCEO found that most studies on testing accommodations focus on presentation and timing / scheduling. Testing accommodations for non-disabled LEP students were not included in the study. This study exemplifies that there exists a significant amount of research on testing accommodations for non-traditional students, mainly students with disabilities and special education students, but less on testing accommodations specifically for LEP students.

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[23] To access the database go to: http://www.cehd.umn.edu/NCEO/OnlinePubs/AccommBibliography/AccomStudies.htm

[24] Students with disabilities, including LEP students with disabilities, are included among the studies. Non-disabled LEP students are not.

Table 6. Percentage of Accommodations Studies in Reviewed Research

Accommodations Categories	Percentage
Setting	5
Timing / Scheduling	23
Presentation	42
Response	5
Equipment / Material	12
Other	13

Teachers' Perceptions on Testing Accommodations for Non-Traditional Students

There is limited research documenting teachers' perceptions of testing accommodations for non-traditional students. There are even fewer studies addressing teachers' views specifically on testing accommodations for LEP students.

In 2007, W. M. Brown surveyed 600 general education and special education teachers and examined their perceptions on testing accommodations for disabled students in the state of Virginia. He asked teachers to share their views on fairness and helpfulness of testing accommodations, and found that teachers perceived it "fair that students with disabilities and English as a Second Language students receive test accommodations" (Brown, 2007, p. xi). Brown also found that both special education and general education teachers possessed a good understanding of testing accommodations for non-traditional students (Brown, 2007).

D. G. Brackenreed examined Ontario teachers' perceptions of the efficacy of testing accommodations for students with special needs who take the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT). Like Brown, who sent out surveys, Brackenreed mailed questionnaires to 250 Ontario teachers of Grades 9 and 10. She also conducted 20 on-site interviews after reviewing data gathered from the questionnaires. Brackenreed found that most teachers "do not perceive testing accommodations for students with special needs as yielding test results that can be equivocally compared to those of regular education

students who do not use accommodations" (Brackenreed, 2007, p. i). The only exception is "when sensory accommodations [such as text in Braille for blind students] were used for students with visual or hearing impairments" (Brackenreed, 2007, p. i).

Although both Brown and Brackenreed conducted research on teachers' perceptions of testing accommodations within their own state or province, neither included data specifically for LEP students. The current study, in contrast, focuses on teachers' perceptions of testing accommodations for LEP students only. The omission of accommodations for other special needs groups makes this body of research unique.

Second Language Acquisition

LEP students struggle with English language comprehension and thus are permitted by the IDOE to benefit from testing accommodations. The following is a review of the literature on second language acquisition which sheds light on understanding LEP students as second language learners.

Researchers have embraced the idea of a critical period for second language (L2) learning for the past 50 years. The critical period hypothesis, first conceived by Penfield and Roberts (1959) and later promulgated by Lenneberg (1967), supports the idea that after puberty “second languages are acquired consciously and with great effort, and often not successfully” (Hakuta, 2001, p. 194). Hence, common belief holds that the earlier a student begins L2 acquisition, the greater the chance of gaining proficiency or even fluency in that language.

Critical period supporters range from educators who promote early foreign language programs in elementary schools to advocates for English-only education who believe that language minority students benefit most from intensive English language instruction. Over the years, researchers and educators have not challenged the critical period hypothesis, accepting its tenets to be in accordance with L2 learning. However, a recent study conducted by Hakuta, Bialystok, and Wiley (2003) questioned the validity of

a specific “magical age” at which the pattern of L2 acquisition sharply declines and increased learning difficulties begin.

Hakuta et al. (2003) relied on data from the 1990 U.S. Census to test the critical period hypothesis for second language acquisition. Focusing on both 15 and 20 years as cutoff points for ending the critical period, they found no confirmation of a point of change in language-learning probability. They concluded, “The most compelling finding was that the degree of success in second-language acquisition steadily declines throughout the life span” (Hakuta et al., 2003, p. 37). Bialystok and Miller (1999) found similarly in their study of three groups of English language learners that “there is no evidence in the data to warrant attributing observed differences in performance to a critical period” (p. 144).

The lack of a critical period in no way diminishes the fact that age has an effect on the ease with which a learner can acquire proficiency in an L2. “The younger the better” approach to language learning remains uncontroversial as a solid pedagogical practice. However, by removing the focus from a specific cut-off age limit, the need to “hurry up and learn” dissipates, making it possible to consider other elements that are key to L2 success.

Hakuta et al. (2003) wrote that the backgrounds of English language learners play an important role in learners’ success. They concluded that socio-economic levels and particularly the amount of formal education “are important in predicting how well immigrants learn English” (Hakuta et al., 2003, p. 37).

Collier (1995) found that non-native English-speaking immigrant students who engaged in formal language education in their native tongues before arriving in the United States took fewer years to achieve fluency in English compared to immigrant students who received little to no language education before immigrating. Collier wrote, “This pattern exists across many student groups, regardless of the particular home language that students speak, country of origin, socioeconomic status, and other student

background variables (Collier, 1995, p. 4). Collier concluded that students who received 2 to 3 years of language education in their countries of origin took "at least 5-7 years to reach typical native-speaker performance" (Collier, 1995, p. 4). In contrast, those students with no formal language training "took 7-10 years or more to reach age and grade-level norms of their native English-speaking peers" (Collier, 1995, p. 4).

Hakuta et al. (2000), from the University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute, arrived at similar conclusions. After collecting data from four different school districts (two in California and two in Canada), they concluded that it takes several years to attain oral and academic English proficiency:

> The clear conclusion emerging from these data sets is that even in two California districts that are considered the most successful in teaching English to LEP students, oral proficiency takes 3 to 5 years to develop, and academic English proficiency can take 4 to 7 years. (Hakuta et al., 2000, p. i)

Experts in the field of second language acquisition have written extensively in support of the theory that it takes several years to gain oral and written proficiency in a non-primary language (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1999; Collier, 1995; Hakuta et al., 2000; Milloy & Fischer, 2002). With this in mind, practical and ethical questions come into play, such as whether it is pedagogically reasonable or responsible to expect students who have studied minimal academic English to achieve language proficiency on an English/language arts test. Standardized exams, such as the GQE, are aimed at testing the skills of native English speakers; non-native English speakers are a significantly smaller demographic of test takers. It is not surprising when LEP students achieve substandard scores on English/language arts exams given that test makers have not written the exams with them in mind.

A Background on Limited English Proficient Education in the United States

Limited English proficient (LEP) education in the United States grew out of the struggles of immigrant schoolchildren in California to gain equal educational opportunity in the 1960s and 1970s. Although many language-minority groups began to celebrate their native language traditions at that time, others blamed the schools' Americanization[25] process for the loss of languages (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002). Immigrant groups' frustration over equal educational opportunity culminated in fighting for the historic 1974 U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Lau v. Nichols*, which "guaranteed equal educational opportunity to non-English speaking students by requiring public schools to provide special assistance to these students to learn English" (Spring, 2001, p. 106). The "special assistance" eventually emerged as LEP programs that educators introduced into public schools around the country.

The *Lau v. Nichols* case involved the families of Kinney Kinmon Lau and 12 other non-English speaking Chinese American students who filed a lawsuit in federal district court on behalf of nearly 3,000 Chinese American students claiming that the San Francisco public school system must accommodate their children's language needs by providing specialized English language assistance. The plaintiffs argued that the failure of the schools to provide adequate language assistance violated Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which states:

> No person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance. (U.S. Department of Labor, 2008)

The district court ruled in favor of the school district, stating that LEP students "were receiving equal educational opportunity because they were receiving the same

[25] The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines *Americanize* as: "to acquire or conform to American traits."

education as all students in the district" (Spring, 2001, p. 107). Outraged, Chinese American families appealed to the U.S. Court of Appeals, and eventually pursued their agenda all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. The Supreme Court eventually overturned the decisions of the lower courts. On January 21, 1974, in a unanimous decision, the Supreme Court found that the state had discriminated against students based on native language and national origin. The Court stated that "there is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum, for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education" (U.S. Department of Labor, 2008).

While Chinese American students and their families were battling the public school system through the courts, Mexican Americans were fighting for educational justice through public demonstrations. In the late 1960s, Mexican American students boycotted four high schools in East Los Angeles with a list of demands, among them the proliferation of bilingual programs, the offering of courses in Mexican American history and culture, and the choice of Mexican food for school lunches. Students also demanded the hiring of more Spanish-speaking teachers and the release of teachers whom they regarded as "anti-Mexican American" (Wollenberg, quoted in Spring, 2001, p. 110). The newly formed Texas political organization, La Raza Unida[26], emerged as a supporter of the students' efforts. The high profile support of La Raza Unida garnered the attention of politicians who exploited the students' and La Raza Unida's efforts for political gain during the election season. The attention culminated in the legislation of the Bilingual Education Act of 1968, which opened the way for schools to receive federal funding for native-language classroom instruction. This act sought to reverse prevailing negative attitudes that vilified non-English language instruction, most strongly since World War I.

[26] "La Raza Unida," meaning "the United People," was an independent political movement aimed at increasing "Chicano political power" (Mintz, 2009).

American hostility toward Germany during the First World War eventually moved the United States "to push for monolingualism and the teaching of German as a foreign language was eliminated in most school districts because pro-melting pot ideologues portrayed it as un-American" (Ovando, 2003, p. 5). Monolingual classroom instruction appeared during this time in the early 20th century when schools were becoming standardized and bureaucratized institutions (Tyack, 1974). One strategy to maintain homogeneity was to eliminate all but English language instruction in the classroom. By 1923, 34 state legislatures had ordained English-only instruction in all private and public primary schools (Kloss, 1977/1998; Ovando, 2003). By the late 1960s, English-only instruction remained the status quo. The Bilingual Education Act of 1968, followed by both the *Lau v. Nichols* case and the Equal Educational Opportunity Act of 1974, made it possible for students to receive instruction in their native languages.

Issues of Equity in Learning

Title XX of The Equal Educational Opportunity Act claims that "no State shall deny equal educational opportunity to an individual on account of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin" (Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium, 2008). Despite the law, de facto discrimination exists in American classrooms for those who do not subscribe to traditional majority groups. Students who struggle with financial poverty, are non-white, or come from immigrant families continue to lag behind financially stable, White counterparts. Although there has been evidence to support American education as a model of equal opportunity and open accessibility, differences remain in the quality of education and the opportunity for social mobility within stratification (Labaree, 2007).

In his book, *Savage Inequalities*, Jonathan Kozol (1991) posited that a significant basis for the financial inequalities in American education lies in the disparities in property taxes. The families of students who live in wealthier neighborhoods, such as suburban areas, pay more taxes; hence, there are more available tax revenue dollars to spend on wealthier students' education. To illustrate this point, Kozol compared a

classroom in a Chicago public school to one in the nearby suburb of Winnetka, Illinois. He wrote that students in a Chicago classroom "received approximately $90,000 less each year than would have been spent on them if they were pupils in a school such as New Trier High" (Kozol, 1991, p. 54).

Analyzing the uneven tax dollar revenue amounts earmarked for public schools is a starting point for trying to understand the disproportionate quantities of funding benefiting public school instruction. However, the discrepancies between urban and suburban schools are greater than the financial implications alone. In their book, *Stepping over the Color Line* (which focuses on the efforts of educators to integrate city and county schools in St. Louis, Missouri), authors Amy Stuart Wells and Robert L. Crain wrote that the urban students who left city schools for county ones were among the most motivated students. They also contended that these students came from the most motivated urban families, thereby taking with them strong, positive family influence and hence, removing that influence from the urban schools. Wells and Crain wrote, "Most [educators] insisted that the desegregation plan had resulted less in a 'brain drain' of the highest achieving students from the city schools than in a drain of students with the most active and involved parents" (Wells & Crain, 1997, p. 156)

Family influence is another kind of "wealth" that is commonly found in suburban schools. Both financial resources and family influence offer students the possibility of greater opportunity. According to Wells and Crain, "These successful transfer students talk about the new worlds that have been opened up to them – about scholarship programs, internships, and jobs they say they never would have heard of in their city schools" (Wells & Crain, 1997, p. 182.) By bussing urban students to suburbs, urban students have benefited from the opportunity to meet children from families that could assist them to obtain internships and interviews with influential people. These kinds of social networking opportunities would have been rare or nonexistent in their former schools. Wells and Crain concluded:

> Most black students in segregated urban schools lack the social networks and personal contacts with people in corporations, law firms, universities, and art museums – contacts who could help them get summer jobs, teach them about career paths, and introduce them to possibilities for life after high school. (Wells & Crain, 1997, p. 84)

Children from immigrant families face many of the same struggles as their urban peers when it comes to lacking the social networking connections and contacts that help to lead to greater social mobility possibilities. These children struggle, as well, with a language barrier that leaves them at a disadvantage when learning curricula in the same way and at the same pace as their peers. School bilingual programs have been successful in working with students to help bridge the academic gap. Educators have developed testing accommodations and remediation practices with the purpose of elevating test scores and increasing academic understanding for students whose first language is not English. As the Indiana Department of Education stated, testing accommodations are intended to "level the playing field with non-disabled, non-language deficient peers in the test-taking situation" (ISTEP+ Program Manual, 2006-2007). However, it remains questionable whether a series of testing accommodations (including bilingual dictionaries, extra test-taking time, or additional restroom breaks) can assist students in this goal.

Thomas and Bainbridge warned that the mantra, "All children can learn," is often misunderstood to mean "at the same level" or "in the same amount of time." This interpretation overlooks the fact that "many students come from homes in which parents have few educational or financial resources" (Thomas & Bainbridge, 2001, p. 660). The "all children can learn" point of view is also superficial, since it does not address the process of learning and achieving. It is important not to overlook the hard work that many students undertake in an attempt to "keep up" with their peers.

Summary

A substantial amount of literature is available regarding the increase in implementation of exit exams as a part of statewide testing programs. Studies on testing

accommodations for students with disabilities, mainly special education students, have become prevalent, though research specifically on testing accommodations for non-disabled LEP students is still lacking. This particular study seeks to justify that imbalance by focusing on testing accommodations for non-disabled LEP learners. As for second-language acquisition, there is sufficient literature supporting the idea that both age and exposure to the target language are important factors in learning a second language. Researchers have found that it takes several years to attain oral and academic English proficiency. This study supports that notion by pointing out that many LEP students do not benefit from several years of academic English instruction before they take the GQE, and consequently they struggle with passing the exam. Finally, an ample amount of historical research documenting LEP education in the United States, as well as research highlighting the educational struggles of minority students, has been published over several decades. This literature is beneficial to understanding the plight of LEP students and their families living in the United States.

The literature lacks not only in the number of studies specifically on testing accommodations for non-disabled LEP students, but also in the area of published research that explores how teachers and other education practitioners view statewide testing, its strengths, and its limitations. For the most part, teachers' voices have been absent from the dialogue in published studies regarding statewide testing and exit exams. The current study is an attempt to document teachers' views on a specific aspect of the testing process: teachers' perceptions of testing accommodations for LEP students taking Indiana's GQE.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This project is a single-site case study. A case study is a detailed study of a single social unit (Payne & Payne, 2004). Because this particular "social unit" was located in one place (Grant High School), it is called "single site." This type of study employs qualitative research methods that are "especially interested in how ordinary people observe and describe their lives" (Silverman, as cited in Payne & Payne, 2004, p. 170). The term *qualitative methods* is an overarching term to describe different types of research, including case studies research. Robert K. Yin wrote that in a case study "a 'how' or a 'why' question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control" (Yin, 1994, p. 9).

Through this case study, I hoped to discover teachers' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the educational practice of using testing accommodations for LEP students. According to Sharan B. Merriam, "A case study approach is often the best methodology for addressing these problems [problems of practice] in which understanding is sought in order to improve practice" (Merriam, 1988, p. xiii). Hopefully this study would be helpful to educators so that they would reassess the needs of LEP students and ultimately change the way English learners take the GQE.

I relied on a semi-structured, open-ended interview method to conduct research. Michael Quinn Patton wrote, "The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in and on someone else's mind" (Patton, 1990, p. 278). This research project relied on teachers sharing their perspectives. Patton described three different types of interview practices, the third of which he called the *standardized open-ended interview*, which is the practice I employed in this study. Patton stated that this type of interview "consists of a set of questions carefully worded and arranged with the intention of taking each respondent through the same sequence and asking each respondent the same questions with

essentially the same words" (Patton, 1990, p. 280). According to Yin, most case study interviews are open-ended (Yin, 1994). Using the open-ended interview method, I was able to uniformly ask the same questions of each respondent, thus minimizing variations in the questioning. (For my list of interview questions, see Appendix E.)

Pilot Study

Prior to beginning the research study, I conducted a pilot study using a semi-structured, open-ended interview method. Yin wrote that a pilot study helps the researcher "to develop relevant lines of questions – possibly even providing some conceptual clarification for the research design as well" (Yin, 1994, p. 74). The pilot study allowed me to test my interview questions in advance to ensure that the questions would enable me to gather desired data from the respondents. The pilot interviews stimulated my interest in this project and helped me adjust and refine my questions accordingly.

The pilot study consisted of interviews with three language arts (foreign language) teachers and one math teacher at a high school situated in the same city as Grant High School. I chose this high school for several reasons: first, because I desired to conduct pilot interviews away from the target research location; and second, because the school was easily accessible because I am presently employed there as a Spanish teacher. Interviewing my colleagues allowed me to learn their professional opinions, which is different from engaging in our usual hallway banter during student passing periods. I was aware that I would enter into the interview sessions with some teachers I had known for years and that this familiarity would produce a friendliness that would be absent from interviewing mostly total strangers at Grant High School. However, I did not feel that this more relaxed atmosphere compromised the goal of my pilot study, which was to confirm that my questions would yield the type of data I wanted to collect and analyze.

Although at the onset I felt confident regarding my interview questions, I failed to ask several questions that would later become an important part of the research study. For example, I wanted to know whether teachers felt that the testing situation was biased in any way against LEP students. I included that question when I interviewed Grant teachers but not during pilot interviews.

Initially I had envisioned two sets of questions, one set for LEP teachers that was specific about testing accommodations and their uses, and the other a more general set of questions for language arts and math teachers. The pilot school where I teach did not employ LEP teachers because all LEP students are mainstreamed into the general student population. In the absence of LEP teachers, I substituted foreign language teachers in their place. This move did not yield the kind of responses I was looking for because foreign language teachers have limited experiences with LEP students and testing accommodations. Therefore, I adjusted my questions so that by the time I talked to the third foreign language teacher, I was using the same set of questions that I used when interviewing the math teacher for the pilot study.

For the first two pilot study interviews, I omitted one of the key questions I later asked at Grant High School: whether teachers consider testing accommodations to be capable of "leveling the playing field" between LEP students and general education students taking the GQE. Although I did not ask teachers if they could identify and comment on bias in the testing system, several made sure I knew that they thought the test was restrictive. I concentrated on asking teachers about accommodations rather than uncovering their perspectives regarding the present testing system. I realized, however, that I was equally interested in teachers' responses regarding the question of bias, so I included that question in subsequent interviews.

The pilot study showed that the teachers viewed testing accommodations as helping LEP students to achieve better results on the GQE. However, when asked, teachers stated that accommodations alone are incapable of "leveling the playing field"

for LEP students in the test-taking situation. They perceived LEP students as capable of achieving at the same level as general education students but stated that linguistic and cultural disadvantages make it difficult to determine what LEP students really know. Some teachers recommended that Spanish versions of the test be made available, particularly for the mathematics portion. Others suggested that bilingual interpreters be in the room during test time.

All of the foreign language teachers possessed experience proctoring the GQE exam for LEP students in the pilot high school, whereas the math teacher had past experience proctoring the exam for LEP students in another school. Although the LEP students were mainstreamed, during test time they were removed from the general population and homogeneously placed with a Spanish teacher who administered the exam. When I asked the Spanish teachers why this was so, they could only speculate. They knew it was not permissible for them to assist a student in the Spanish language during the exam, but suggested that LEP students feel more comfortable taking the GQE from a teacher who is familiar both with them and with Spanish.

All teachers expressed concern about the cultural relevancy of test items on the GQE, along with aforementioned linguistic matters. One teacher suggested that students not take the GQE until they have "been here a few years, if possible." Other teachers echoed a similar sentiment, expressing concern about LEP students being unprepared to take an exam that is challenging even for native English speakers.

Personal Experience Testing LEP Students

As a former middle-school and present high-school teacher of Spanish, I have proctored several GQE and ISTEP exams over the last 20 years. My experiences with statewide testing have fostered an interest in conducting research in this field.

Prior to test week, teachers attend a training session led by school guidance counselors on how to effectively administer the upcoming exams. Teacher training usually consists of several after-school hours in a single afternoon. After instruction,

counselors provide teachers with schedules, instructional manuals, and student test manuals and answer sheets. Teachers also receive classroom assignments and the names of students they will be testing. At this time, teachers must make sure they have procured all necessary supplies (such as rulers, calculators and protractors for math) before the test dates arrive.

LEP students are eligible to use word-to-word bilingual dictionaries on the exams, along with other testing accommodations described in Chapter I. These dictionaries are provided by the school's Bilingual Director. Each school where I have taught houses a Director of Bilingual Services: a person who has received training in student test administration from the school corporation's Bilingual Department and who is in charge of testing for LEP students at an assigned school. This person works with teachers in the administration of statewide exams. It is the Bilingual Director's responsibility to provide the bilingual dictionaries and other items LEP students need for testing.

Because the Bilingual Director cannot possibly test all LEP students, school counselors assign classroom teachers to assist and test small groups of students in several locations. The classroom teachers may or may not have received additional training on how to test LEP students.

As a Spanish teacher, I have often been assigned to help proctor the school's LEP students. Spanish teachers are often asked to do this task even though it is not permissible to assist students in the Spanish language. These students are all LEP level 5, meaning that they have been mainstreamed with the general population because they are advanced English language learners.[27] But this is not to say that level 5 students do not qualify for or need bilingual assistance.

I remember one day several years ago, while alone with a room of testers, when a teacher's aide delivered a cart full of bilingual dictionaries to the classroom door. I was

[27] As noted in Chapter I, all lower-level LEP learners, levels 1 - 4, are bussed to Grant High School.

surprised not only that the dictionaries took so long to arrive, but that I had received no formal training on how to instruct students to use them, or when to use them. I passed out dictionaries to all test-takers and advised students to use them whenever they had a question about the meaning of a word. I was disturbed by my lack of training and preparation on a day that was so important to students' academic careers. I wondered how many teachers had similar experiences.

As a test proctor, I have also witnessed LEP students become restless while taking an exam and have wondered whether or how much a lack of English language proficiency was a source of frustration. These questions surrounding testing for LEP students led to my interest in conducting this study.

Population Sample Selection and Participant Notification

I first contacted the assistant principal at Grant High School to discuss conducting the current research. I felt comfortable calling her office, as we had become acquainted earlier when working in the same school. The following week we met in her office and discussed my research proposal. At that time, she introduced me to several LEP educators in the building and assured me that she would talk to language arts and mathematic teachers to let them know of my intention to interview them. I gave her copies of the project description letter to give to prospective subjects (see Appendix A). I also gave her a copy of my letter of approval from the school corporation to deliver to participant candidates (see Appendix B). After the assistant principal notified these potential participants, I was able to secure appointments with them for interviews via email and through personal contact at Grant High School after school hours. In the subsequent weeks (January through March 2008), I interviewed three mathematics teachers, three English/language arts teachers, four foreign language teachers, and three LEP teachers.

I chose to interview mathematics and English/language arts teachers because these subjects are tested on the GQE. I opted to speak with these particular individuals

on the assistant principal's recommendation because they were the teachers who prepared students to take the GQE.

I also chose to interview foreign language teachers because all had experience working with LEP students. Foreign language teachers have taught LEP students in their classes and have proctored the GQE exam specifically for this group of students. Foreign language teachers have insight into the process of second-language acquisition and understand differing cultural ideas. Their experience made them appropriate candidates for discussing their views on testing accommodations for LEP students.

LEP teachers work most closely with LEP students. The LEP teachers at Grant were certified to teach basic skills classes in math, science, language arts, and social studies. They taught these four subjects to students enrolled in the four LEP levels. Level 1 is for novice English language learners, Levels 2 and 3 are intermediate stages, and Level 4 is for students who are nearly ready to be mainstreamed into the general student population. (LEP students who are mainstreamed are considered "Level 5" and are not taught by an LEP instructor.) During the interviews, LEP teachers provided insight into and awareness of the plight of LEP learners, their struggles with language and culture, and the pressure of performing well on the GQE.

Data Collection and Interviews

I conducted interviews at Grant High School after school hours during the months of January through March 2008. I held interviews at the participants' convenience, as stated in the project description letter they received (see Appendix A). Although most participants appreciated meeting at the school, one participant met me at a different location at her convenience.

Prior to starting the interview process, I asked participants to read and sign the informed consent document (see Appendix C). I also asked them to place a check mark in the box that permitted me to tape record their interviews. All participants consented and all interviews were recorded. Interviews lasted from 15 to 50 minutes.

In addition to using the tape recorder and interview questions, I brought other materials to the interview; among them were a notebook for jotting down key facts (a backup to the tape recorder) and charts and quotes from the ISTEP+ Program Manual (2006-2007). The charts consisted of lists of the state-approved testing accommodations for LEP students, and the quotes were citations from the manual about the purpose of testing accommodations. I brought these items for the teachers to read and reflect upon before providing comments.

Most interview sessions began with friendly conversation and then progressed to semi-structured, open-ended interviews. Over time, the respondents became more relaxed and open about sharing their views. When the interviews were completed, I thanked teachers for their time and reassured them that all data would be kept confidential. I followed up my visits with thank you notes to the participants and to Grant High School administrators.

I transcribed and saved the interviews on my home computer. During transcription, I assigned respondents pseudonyms rather than using their proper names in order to protect anonymity. I continued to use the same pseudonyms for the participants in the final report.

Data Analysis

Analyzing and collecting data are crucial components in conducting case study research. Both data analysis and data collection are conducted at the same time in order to build a coherent interpretation of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Schatzman and Strauss wrote about the importance of analyzing and collecting data concurrently in case it is necessary to adjust observation strategies (Schatzman & Strauss in Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Occasionally, I found it necessary to reword and reorder interview questions after transcribing an early interview. According to Marshall and Rossman, “as a coherent interpretation with related concepts emerges from analysis, negative instances will lead to new data collecting and analysis that serve to strengthen the interpretation”

(Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 152). As the interviews progressed, I found my questions were better and hence the need to make adjustments was less.

The process of analyzing qualitative data requires documenting patterns and themes. Merriam wrote, "Explicitly looking for patterns demands a mindset that will allow for unifying constructs to emerge" (Merriam, 1988, p. 149). I began noticing patterns and themes during the playback of recorded audio interviews. Later I coded the data to identify patterns and themes. I relied on QSR NVivo 7 qualitative software to code the patterns and themes that emerged from the data for use in the final report. The software program, QSR NVivo 7, allowed me to import interview transcripts (Word files) into the program and to `subsequently code the data into nodes (strands of data) to analyze and conceptualize into new, meaningful information. This process is similar to using a highlighter on paper, although with QSR NVivo 7, I could create a printout of several nodes on a single page that constituted a theme rather than resorting to a rudimentary "cut and paste" process.

Limitations of the Study

Researcher Subjectivities

The researcher serves as the primary instrument for collecting and analyzing data, placing him or her central to the qualitative study (Merriam, 1988, p. 19). The researcher's presence means that fallible human characteristics may interfere with the validity of the research, resulting in possible contamination. For this reason, I found it important to control for validity and to be mindful of the possible effects that I could have on the study.

One way that I minimized researcher bias was to frame questions in a general way. This allowed subjects not to feel guided in their responses. For example, I asked participants if they could identify any bias in the current testing system. I did not ask them to specifically respond to test bias, ethnic bias, or any other named bias. This way, I could be confident that I was not steering them into any kind of specific response.

Some teachers talked about test bias, citing examples of how a large number of LEP students were unable to answer specific questions on the GQE, whereas regular education students did not seem to have the same struggle. Others talked about testing accommodations being biased against those who are not permitted to use them. Some could not identify any bias. By framing this question in a general way, I was assured that my influence as a researcher was minimal.

Even with the best of intentions, it was impossible for me as a researcher to fully separate myself from my own personal biases. For example, one outcome from the pilot study showed that teachers overwhelmingly thought that there was a need for state-level educators to overhaul the current testing system, citing its unfair treatment of LEP students, and to replace it with a more equitable system of mandates for all learners. Because teachers were unanimous in their opinion, the challenge for me was not to enter into the Grant High School interviews with the preconceived notion that Grant teachers would echo the same opinions. Although the Grant teachers overwhelmingly supported the idea of existing bias in the testing situation, a few did take exception to this point of view. I found myself caught off guard by the dissenting responses and questioned my own ability to work with the data in a fair and unbiased way. Patton cited Guba's order to act as a researcher who is "balanced, fair and conscientious" (Patton, 1990, p. 481). To meet these objectives, I found it necessary to refocus my attention on the interview questions rather than to second guess or become sidetracked by the outcomes. When teachers gave responses that differed from my own point of view or landed outside of my comfort zone, I learned to embrace their answers as an integral part of the data, not to be contaminated by the limitations of my own thinking. In a practical sense, I validated the accuracy of the newer findings by identifying common patterns and themes among them, matching them against those patterns and themes from the initial findings, and eliminating any that appeared deviant or insignificant, since they were not connected to other preexisting data.

Sample Bias

Not all English/language arts teachers and mathematics teachers at Grant who prepare LEP students to pass the GQE participated in this study. One teacher chose not to participate. Also, I did not interview other potential participants given that my recruitment method was to allow the assistant principal to contact appropriate participant candidates. Most of the teachers at Grant whom I contacted to participate in the study consented to do so.

Verification and Validity

Merriam wrote that "validity and reliability are concerns that can be approached through careful attention to a study's conceptualization and the way in which the data were collected, analyzed and interpreted (Merriam, 1988, p. 165). Likewise, Guba and Lincoln (1981, in Merriam, 1988, p. 165) wrote:

> It is difficult to talk about the validity or reliability of an experiment as a whole, but one can talk about the validity and reliability of the instrumentation, the appropriateness of the data analysis techniques, the degree of relationship between the conclusions drawn and the data upon which they presumably rest.

One way I tested for validity was to ensure that I asked the same questions of each participant. This way, the accuracy of the data could be validated in the end after analyzing each interview. Another way I tested for validity, as mentioned earlier, was to match and compare patterns and themes among interviews and to eliminate information that could not be connected to preexisting data.

I also took handwritten notes during interviews in case the tape recorder failed to work or the sound became inaudible during playback. I transcribed all interviews verbatim, which guaranteed that I, the researcher, did not interject my own ideas or interpret text that did not exist. According to Patton, the validity and the reliability of data depend on the extent of the integrity of the researcher (Patton, 1990, p. 11). To maintain integrity, it is important to let the results speak for themselves and not to contaminate them with outside ideas.

Summary

All final data emerged from the process of interviewing, collecting, transcribing, and coding. In Chapter IV, I will discuss the findings, the patterns and themes that I identified and coded, and their relevance to the interviews. In Chapter V, I will discuss the meanings of the patterns and themes in light of the purpose of the study.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine high school educators' perspectives on state-approved testing accommodations for Limited English Proficient (LEP) students taking the Indiana Graduation Qualifying Exam (GQE). The open-ended interviews provided a means by which to extract and understand teachers' views. As Patton wrote, "The purpose of gathering responses to open-ended questions is to enable the researcher to understand and capture the points of view of other people" (Patton, 1990, p. 24). The interviews provided the catalyst for teachers to share their perspectives on testing accommodations.

The respondents, or interviewees, were basic skills, Spanish, and LEP teachers at Grant High School. All teachers worked with LEP students to help these students achieve academic success.

The first group of teachers, basic skills instructors, taught either English / language arts or mathematics at Grant. These teachers were assigned to work with students from all populations, including some special education and LEP students.

The second group, the Spanish teachers, also worked with a variety of student populations, including LEP students. Several LEP students spoke Spanish as their first language. The Spanish teachers worked with these students and others to prepare them to succeed on the GQE.

The final group of teachers, the LEP instructors, worked specifically with LEP students in self-contained classrooms. These teachers served the specialized educational needs of LEP students in addition to teaching students basic skills subjects. They taught English language learning along with the content areas of reading and writing, mathematics, science, and social studies.

This chapter begins with a description of the themes that I derived from the interviews. Next, I introduce the teachers, the subjects they taught, and their teaching backgrounds. Then I examine how teachers' responses pertained to the themes, assess teachers' responses according to school subjects taught, and determine whether there were common patterns or themes among departments. The chapter ends with a summary of the findings.

Identification of Themes

I collected the data for this study from individual interviews with teachers during the spring semester of 2008. Upon the completion of transcription, I analyzed the data to search for patterns and themes among teachers' responses to make sense of the information. Five prominent themes emerged from teachers' responses to my questions and ensuing dialogues:

1. Testing Accommodations as an Equalizer in Testing
2. Perceptions of Bias in the Testing Situation
3. Teachers' Independent Uses of Testing Accommodations
4. Teachers' Recommendations to State Educators and Policymakers
5. Personal Anecdotes: Teachers' Reflections on Language and Culture Differences

I gathered like responses from several teachers to constitute a theme. Not every interview contained every theme. The emergent five themes centered around the central research question: to understand teachers' perspectives on testing accommodations for LEP students taking the GQE.

Testing Accommodations as an Equalizer in Testing

Teachers discussed the extent to which they agreed with the state's purported intent, that testing accommodations "level the playing field" in the test-taking situation between LEP students and non-LEP peers (according to the ISTEP+ Testing Manual.).

Perceptions of Bias in the Testing Situation

This theme is important because several teachers cited bias as the reason they could not support testing accommodations as an equalizer in the testing situation. Hence, teachers' acceptance of bias shaped their opinions about the central research question. Teachers discussed culture bias, bias in the test language, and other types of bias that they associated with testing.

Teachers' Independent Uses of Testing Accommodations

This theme focused on teachers' utilization of testing accommodations apart from the GQE. For example, this included allowing students to use testing accommodations on classroom tests (i.e., not on standardized tests.) These accommodations may not be the same as those permitted by the IDOE for use on the GQE.

Teachers' Recommendations to State Educators and Policymakers

Several teachers shared ideas about how they would improve the testing situation for LEP students and advice they had for educators, text writers, and policy makers.

Personal Anecdotes: Teachers' Reflections on Language and Culture Differences

The final theme, which I present at the end of the teacher profiles, centered on teachers' sharing of personal anecdotes of their experiences with language and culture differences as these elements related to the testing situation. Teachers freely discussed personal experiences that happened to them or to family members and compared these experiences to the struggles that they witnessed students encounter in the classroom. They shared how their own backgrounds helped them understand the challenges faced by LEP students.

Teacher Profiles: English/Language Arts, Mathematics, Spanish, and LEP

Selection of Interviewees

I selected basic skills teachers of English / language arts and mathematics based on their close involvement in working with LEP students to help them succeed on the GQE. Other subjects, such as social studies and science, were not tested on the GQE, which is why I did not interview teachers of those subjects. I did, however, choose to include Spanish teachers because they were familiar with the process of second language acquisition and the challenges facing students who tested in a language other than their native tongue. And naturally, I spoke to the LEP teachers at Grant High School because they worked most closely with LEP students in self-contained classrooms, teaching students the necessary skills to attain academic success.

The following section profiles each teacher's professional background and how individual responses related to the themes of this study.

Mathematics Teachers: Ron, Jackie, and Nate

Ron

Ron had the most teaching experience of the three mathematics teachers I interviewed at Grant High School. He had 23 years in the classroom: 3 years at the middle school level and 20 at the high school level. Ron had a bachelor's degree and taught Pre-Algebra, Algebra One, and Algebra Two.

Ron was the first teacher I interviewed. We sat in the back of his empty classroom after school where he discussed his views on testing accommodations, biases he perceived related to testing, his views on equity, and recommendations to improve the testing situation.

I showed Ron the quote from the GQE testing manual that states that the purpose of testing accommodations is to "level the playing field" between LEP students and their non-LEP peers (IDOE, 2006, ISTEP+ Program Manual, 2006-2007). I then asked Ron if

he thought that testing accommodations were capable of "leveling the playing field," as the IDOE asserts. He stated that he did not think that a "level playing field" could exist. He suggested that because testing accommodations help only "a small amount," it is important that students are well-prepared prior to the test: "Testing accommodations will make it an equal playing field somewhat; accommodations need to be stressed at the preparation part for the test, not on the day of the test." He added that if he taught math to an LEP class, he would offer students accommodations during the class period such as extra time to do math work.

Ron was hesitant about supporting testing accommodations during the exam. He stressed that if accommodations must remain a fixture of GQE testing for LEP students, that during the GQE, LEP students should test in a separate environment away from general education students. He explained:

> I would hope that the [LEP] students who benefit from accommodations are all grouped together, so that they aren't in the general population at the time of testing. This way, the other students don't feel like [the LEP students] are getting an unfair advantage because they get to use accommodations.

I asked Ron if he could identify bias in the testing situation. Although not a test writer by profession, he served on a committee that produced the Core 40 exams[28]. (The IDOE commonly asks teachers to write test questions and drafts.) Ron defended the test writers, saying: "I think that there is a lot of talk about bias in the testing process, and I think people are cognizant of the fact that there is a reason for every question, and every question needs to be stated fairly. So, I think enough is being done." Although Ron did not identify any specific group when he said "there is talk" and "people are cognizant," he clearly verbalized in his summation that the test questions are fair in that "enough is being done."

[28] "Core 40" is the name given to Indiana's course and credit requirement program. Students are mandated to complete 40 credit hours total, including required courses, in order to qualify for a high school diploma. Students complete Core 40 assessments in addition to ISTEP tests.

Ron maintained his position that there is no bias in the testing situation when discussing student performance:

> If students are going to be ranked by GPA, if they're going to be given the opportunity for a scholarship upon a four year completion, I think everybody needs to be assessed the same. I don't think it's fair that if an ESL person earns a B, we give them a B+. You get what you earn.

Ron finished his discussion on "bias" by referring to "calculator bias," a math-specific issue in which some students use higher functioning calculators during an exam, which is advantageous to them. Ron recognized this as a potential fairness problem, but stated that the four-function calculator that the state provides for student use during the GQE makes the exam fair for all students in this regard.

I asked Ron if he had any recommendations for state educators and policymakers regarding testing accommodations on the GQE after he read the list of state-sanctioned testing accommodations. His reply was that the charts appeared thorough and clear in their presentation and purpose and that at this point, he had nothing to add.

Jackie

Jackie taught Pre-Algebra and Algebra One at the time of the study and had taught Algebra Two in the past. She had 7 years' experience, 4 years in middle school and 3 years at the high school level. Jackie was not teaching LEP students at the time of the study, but in past years, LEP students had enrolled in her classes. On the day of the interview, she was busy tutoring students in her classroom after school, which prohibited us from having a private conversation. Jackie taught mostly freshmen, preparing them to take the GQE, which they would do at the beginning of their sophomore year. She had a master's degree.

Jackie discussed how a deficiency in English understanding hinders LEP students from performing well in mathematics, especially on story problems. She said, "The biggest concern is the language barrier." Also of concern was whether students could understand cultural nuances found in math story problems. She added, "Sometimes the

story problems are not related to something that students could personally understand." As an example, she recounted an occasion when students were reading a test question about horses and a stable, and some of the students did not know the meaning of the word "stable" as it related to a barnyard. Even so, she added, some culture questions are difficult for general education students as well.

In addition to language and culture issues, Jackie stated that the disparity of income could impact the test-taking experience for a group of students. She said, "Everybody has a different background. A student from a wealthy suburb, in a two million dollar house, is going to have different experiences from a kid who has never been out of Midfield or lives in poverty." After hesitating, she added, "I don't know if you could ever make a fair test."

I asked Jackie if she thought that testing accommodations for LEP students contributed to "leveling the playing field" during the GQE. She replied, "They help a moderate amount. I don't know if they make it totally level, but they help."

I asked Jackie if she ever used testing accommodations in the classroom for LEP students, and if so, to share her experiences. Jackie described an incident with a student in an Algebra II class who spoke little English, but fortunately was able to turn to a bilingual classmate for help:

> I taught two Algebra II classes where I had numerous ENL students in them because the ENL program doesn't offer Algebra II. I had one student that spoke very little English. He seemed to be OK with me because math is mostly universal. Even so, he had a friend who was in level four or five of the ENL program who assisted him. They moved their desks together and I had them work together all of the time. I had no problem with that. The ENL student seemed to follow what we did on the board and did very well.

When Jackie said that the two students worked together "all of the time," it is unclear if she meant also during tests. If she did, this collaboration would be an example of a teacher-invented testing accommodation for classroom use, different from the ones sanctioned by the state for use on the GQE.

Nate

Nate was a ninth-grade teacher, teaching Pre-Algebra and Algebra One. Like Jackie, he invested class time in preparing his students to succeed on the GQE. He had 11 years' experience, 3 years as a high school teacher and 8 as an eighth-grade middle school teacher. Nate was relatively new to Grant, although he had been employed as a teacher for several years in a nearby school district. He held a master's degree.

I sat down with Nate in his classroom after school when all of the students had left for the day. He was friendly and laid-back during our interview. When I asked him to share the degree to which testing accommodations help LEP students, he said that accommodations helped "a little bit" but added that he saw the mere possession of them as empowering to students. He said, "Accommodations help students feel more comfortable, which would improve test scores."

Nate stated that one of the frustrations he experienced during ISTEP+ testing for eighth graders (which was his only prior experience supervising a statewide exam) was related to his own inability to help LEP students with language issues:

> If there was a section on the test that students didn't understand, and you, the teacher, don't have the answers, do you send students that speak Spanish to one room and have an interpreter read the problems to them? I wouldn't be able to help students.

Nate talked specifically about assisting Spanish-speaking students with English. He described his own attempts and how he encouraged students to help each other in the classroom. He disclosed that he allows students to use Spanish during his math classes. He talked about how Spanish-speaking students often help each other and said that he encourages this practice. Sometimes students receive language help at home from older siblings. He recalled an incident: "One time, I had a girl in class who was having her older brother help her by translating math problems into Spanish at home. I told her this was fine if it helps you understand." Nate added, with a smile, "Then I said to tell her brother to come in and help me understand Spanish."

Although Nate encouraged students to help each other during class time, he made it clear that he does not allow LEP students to benefit from testing accommodations during classroom tests. When I showed him the list of GQE testing accommodations sanctioned by the IDOE and asked him if he ever employed them independently during classroom testing, he replied, "No." He made it clear that although he allows Spanish to be spoken in class, he does not prepare LEP students differently for the GQE, nor does he allow them special accommodations during classroom test time.

English / Language Arts Teachers: Diana, Don, and Kim

Diana

Diana, who held a master's degree, taught tenth- and eleventh-grade English with 38 years' teaching experience, 30 at the high school level. The day we met, she was busy giving instructions to her student teacher after hours, which left her with limited time for an interview. We sat down in her classroom where Diana shared her perceptions on GQE testing, the element of bias in the testing situation, how she prepares students to take the GQE, as well as her fondness for the field of mathematics, a surprising statement coming from an experienced language arts teacher.

When I asked Diana if she thought testing accommodations were capable of "leveling the playing field" for LEP students, she confidently replied, "Yes." When I asked her if she could identify bias, she stated, "Personally, having dealt with the test extensively, I believe there is absolutely no bias, unequivocally no bias." Diana perceived that the inclusion of testing accommodations was sufficient to create a testing situation free of bias for LEP students. Diana explained that her stance was based on the broader view that GQE scores ultimately serve to open doors for students to experience greater opportunities. She said:

> I think I'm looking at the bigger picture in that the passage of the test indicates to our employers and colleges that students are able to do the ninth grade skills in English. I think that the state has appropriately addressed that concern so the

> students could succeed in the work environment or succeed hopefully in further education."

Diana stated that she had "dealt with the test extensively." Her 30 years' experience as a high school instructor no doubt afforded many opportunities to become well acquainted with the GQE, as well as with other types of standardized assessment exams. She also mentioned in the interview that she "should have been a math teacher" and that she had experience being involved in "heavy data analysis" in the past, although she did not specify in what capacity.

I asked Diana if she ever accommodated LEP students in her classroom. She replied, "I have not had to this year, but last year and in the past I have." She explained, "I've given [LEP students] preps and an adaptive version of the book. Last year and early this year [LEP students] were provided with an Indiana University student who came in and assisted them."

I took the question a step farther and asked Diana if she ever used testing accommodations for LEP students during classroom tests. She replied, "I have no problem with students using an accommodation, like a bilingual dictionary, if they want to provide it." Diana disclosed that students have used bilingual dictionaries in the past, but that she has never provided them, nor has she offered any other IDOE-sanctioned accommodation for LEP students during a classroom test.

Diana stated that she had no suggestions to improve the GQE testing situation for LEP students.

Don

Don was a veteran teacher with 31 years' experience, 20 at the high school level, and held a master's degree. As a ninth-grade teacher, he dedicated a good portion of class time preparing students to do well on the following year's GQE. Don was in his 10th year teaching in the city of Midfield, including several years at Grant High School.

When I showed up at Don's classroom, he was finishing a late after-school lunch. He described a busy day that left him no time to eat during his 30-minute lunch break.

As we began to talk about his classes, he opened up about his interactions with Hispanic LEP students, the largest demographic of LEP students that he instructs, and generalized about their performance:

> Hispanic LEP students can communicate verbally without too much difficulty. Sometimes they are better writers than some of my native born American kids because they have two languages. I have noticed that people who have studied Spanish tend to do better grammatically.

After chatting with Don about Hispanic LEP performance, I showed him the list of GQE testing accommodations sanctioned by the state. I asked him if he ever used these specific accommodations in the classroom for LEP students. He replied that he did, such as giving students extra time to take a test, but that he offered accommodations to non-LEP students as well. He added that sometimes he allowed LEP students to take their test in another room with the assistance of a bilingual teacher or aide.

Don thought non-LEP students had an advantage in testing since they spoke English both at school and at home. Don said, “Some of these kids coming from multi-language homes aren’t necessarily getting the practice outside school. At school, language is very formal. Of course, once they leave school, language is very informal.” Don perceived that bias in the testing situation results from the tests being in “standard English,” which benefits some students, but not all.

Kim

Kim had 6 years of teaching experience, 1 year at Grant High School. She taught eleventh-grade English and maintained the school’s tenth-grade Language Arts Computer Lab. Kim was very enthusiastic about the computer lab and shared that it is “really good for the ESL students, especially at the high school level.” She held a master’s degree.

On the day we spoke, Kim was busy running an after-school tutoring session on the computers in her classroom. She was assisting several students and took time to talk to me "in shifts." I waited for her in the empty classroom next door and interviewed her when she could get away for a few minutes at a time.

Early in the interview, I asked Kim whether testing accommodations "level the playing field" for LEP students, and she replied: "I'm not sure 'level' fits. I'm sure accommodations attempt to make testing more level, but I don't think that it's level."

Kim was concerned that standardized tests are geared more toward traditional learners, leaving unconventional students at a disadvantage. She claimed that test writers include ideas that are not familiar across cultures:

> There are nuances in the test itself that speak to people that have been raised in this culture; people who have experiences with a common background. This information has nothing to do, or little to do, with actual language proficiency.

Kim suggested that the "nuances" do not play an essential part in measuring language proficiency. In her opinion, what is harmful to test takers is that the writers make the assumption that all test takers share in many of the same experiences, and therefore include these assumptions when creating the tests. Kim explained:

> Most of them [test makers] have a certain set of experiences that they think is shared among everybody taking the test. A lot of non-native speakers are coming from other cultures; [test makers] can't make those same assumptions. I think this practice is a problem with standardized testing across the globe, whether it is kindergarten or graduate school.

Kim summed up her thoughts: "I think that once we level the language barrier, we would see that the bias is in the questions. There is nuance in the questions that suggests 'common knowledge.'"

I showed Kim the list of IDOE accommodations and asked her if she employed any of those accommodations in her classes. She stated that she allows "all of them" in the classroom prior to the test. She named the most common accommodations that she permits, which include extra time, bilingual dictionaries, break time, and small group settings.

When I asked Kim if she had any recommendations for the IDOE, she shared that the biggest "problem in testing" is that "students don't ever see the result." She explained, "There is no direct consequence, reinforcement or reward. There is no accountability on behalf of the kid." Kim continued:

> What state educators and writers do not know, and what the classroom teacher does know, is that students spend an hour and forty-five minutes struggling, taking a nap, or writing notes to their friends instead of choosing to fill in the bubbles. That [reality] is huge. I have watched this process happen multiple times, multiple years, in multiple settings, in multiple schools. The problem is: no accountability.

For Kim, a lack of student accountability during testing poses a greater threat to success than accommodations for LEP students. One reason Kim is less concerned about LEP student achievement may be because she considers the ninth-grade reading program in her school to be particularly beneficial for LEP students. She explained, “The program is designed for the struggling reader or the English as a Second Language learner."

Kim's confidence in her school's reading program keeps her optimistic that LEP students can experience success in the test-taking situation.

Spanish Teachers: Monica, Ted, Alan and Mary

Monica

At the time I interviewed Monica, she was in her first full year of teaching, with 6 months’ prior experience at the middle school level. Monica was a Mexican national and had several years’ experience working with Latino students in the United States prior to teaching Spanish. She taught Spanish I and II and had earned a bachelor’s degree.

Monica and I sat in the teacher's lounge for the interview because, as a new teacher in a school with limited space, she had not been assigned her own classroom that year. Instead, Monica spent the year teaching in other foreign language teachers' classrooms during those teachers' planning periods.

Monica stressed test preparation as the key for positive LEP student performance on the GQE. She stated, "I think students need to know the content of the material that they're being tested on, not just a word here or there. If they are well prepared, they will be fine." I asked if she thought accommodations help. She said, "I think so. They will help, but students need to be ready for the test."

Monica added that even if teachers prepare LEP students for the test, these students will still struggle with language comprehension in ways that general education students do not. She said, "It takes students quite a bit of time to become proficient in a language. If they're tested on a word problem in math, and they don't understand the language, they're going to be behind. Even in class they'll be behind."

Monica favored offering LEP students additional test preparation time. She explained, "I think [LEP] students should have additional preparation to what the rest of the school has because they're not at the same level as other students." She added:

> A student who has parents that have lived here all their lives and are educated has an advantage over a student who has just come in from another country. These students do not share the same amount of vocabulary. Even if the student [new to the country] learns English in school, it takes him longer to become proficient.

Monica went a step further by advocating separate standards for LEP students, a recommendation that she would make to state educators. She explained:

> [LEP students] should not be measured in the same way as other students, because they are not at the other students' level. [State educators] should offer different standards for LEP students given the reason that these students are not proficient in English. Why should LEP students be held accountable to the same standards?

Monica explained that her position is based on personal experience growing up a native Spanish-speaker who, as a child, moved to San Diego with her family and found that she needed additional language assistance to keep up with other students at school. She shared, "I am familiar with kids' situations who have just come here. I know what they're going through."

Ted

Ted was a veteran Spanish teacher. He had been teaching for 28 years, all but 7 years at the high school level. He held the distinction of being at Grant longer than the other foreign language teachers. He taught Spanish I, II, and III and held a master's degree.

I interviewed Ted during the last period of the school day in the foreign language teachers' workroom in the foreign language hallway. His room was being occupied by another foreign language teacher at that time who did not have a classroom of her own due to school overcrowding.

Ted possessed a varying opinion on the effectiveness of testing accommodations:

> I would say that [accommodation success] would depend somewhat on the level of the students who are taking the individual tests. Students who are in the upper levels of the ESL program might benefit from receiving more break time - kind of recovery time from testing - than someone who is in the second or third level. So, I would say, yes, some accommodations would be helpful as far as kind of leveling the playing field, kind of helping with comprehension or helping with recovery time.

Although Ted was in favor of accommodations for high-functioning LEP students, he thought that they were a less effective tool for lower level LEP students. He disclosed his opinion in the context of talking about how schools submit scores: that the scores of all students are often combined to report a school average:

> I think we should focus on whom we're testing because along with ESL students we have a large population of special ed learners, many of whom are working with deficient skills. To test these students, along with ESL students who are working at a level two or three or lower, and report their scores alongside the general population scores (students who are being recruited by universities and are in the science research program), seems unfair. This [unjust practice] should be addressed with the idea of modifying testing. I'm not sure testing accommodations are going to get over that kind of hurdle for those particular [deficient] students.

Ted added, "For students who are still trying to achieve basic comprehension of the language, no amount of extra break time or some other accommodation is going to help, especially in reading comprehension or linguistic comprehension."

Ted shared that his opinion on testing accommodations is based on his experience as a second-language learner, on being a Spanish teacher, and also on having worked with LEP students.

Ted's recommendation about modifying testing for LEP students is reflected in his opinion that educators must "look very carefully at the populations we're testing." He asked, rhetorically:

> Are we going to make a one-on-one comparison between the student who is valedictorian and the student who has just been in this school corporation for less than six weeks and expect the same kind of results?

Ted was concerned about bias in the testing language:

> Someone who is at a level two in the language is not going to be able to handle an extended reading comprehension section as well as somebody who is in level four. The same thing goes with the general public students. Students who are at or above their reading level as a sophomore or a freshman versus someone who is still reading at a sixth-grade level. There could be bias here. I realize that we always try to build tests that don't have cultural bias in them, but sometimes just in the language that's chosen, it can be a bit of a problem.

I asked Ted if he accommodated LEP students in the classroom. He stated that some students need help understanding directions: "I do have some special needs students, both Latinos and general education students, who need the directions read specifically to them, reiterated, or explained differently." He added, "Generally, in the testing format, I'll do the directions in both English and Spanish."

Other than providing bilingual directions, Ted offered no other accommodations to LEP students.

Alan

Alan had 29 years' experience, 19 at the high school level, and 6 at Grant. He had a master's degree and taught advanced Spanish III, IV, and V. Alan served as the Foreign Language Department Chairperson and had held this position for several years at Grant, as well as at other schools where he was previously employed.

As department chairperson, Alan frequently worked in his classroom after school hours, sometimes into the early evening. It was there that I met Alan for the interview. After making conversation about school athletics and reminiscing about our favorite college team, we sat down to discuss LEP student performance and the merits of testing accommodations.

Alan posited that testing accommodations help "a small amount" to "level the playing field." He reflected on his own efforts as a foreign language learner and compared those to LEP students:

> Just by giving me a little extra time didn't mean that I was understanding what I was doing when I was first studying another language. I think extra time can give only minimal help since it gives students time to go back and check things, or maybe concentrate on a question or two that they're having difficulty with.

Alan described the biases that he viewed in the testing situation:

> If students are not proficient in the language, story problems could cause concerns. So, I imagine the test is biased towards people whose first language is not English. But if students are being tested on English skills, I don't know what else you could do about that. All in all, I think the test is biased because they [test writers] are expecting people to have a basic grasp, a knowledge of the English language, while students are still struggling with it.

Many of the LEP students in Alan's Spanish classes are Spanish-speakers, who enroll to improve grammar, reading, and writing skills. Alan described a unique situation:

> Some [LEP students] are somewhat bored, but they do the work and they participate in class. Sometimes they question because they may be used to saying and spelling things grammatically incorrectly. I'll say 'it's not right' and they sometimes get a little defensive. With vocabulary terms, I try to inform them that there are synonymous expressions with the expressions they use. [LEP] students usually are pretty good about working with others. I think [LEP] students get bored because [the lesson] is something that they're familiar with.

By studying Spanish, Spanish-speaking LEP students are able to improve upon their existing skills and become better proficient in the language.

As for permitting LEP students to use accommodations in his classroom, Alan explained that his classes are bilingual in Spanish and English and that he allows bilingual dictionaries in specific cases:

> If we're doing a translation from English to Spanish sometimes students don't know what the English words mean so I allow them to use a dictionary. But for testing purposes, everything we do is either reading Spanish, listening to Spanish, and/or writing Spanish, so unless it's a long essay, or a timed writing essay exam, I generally don't let students use dictionaries.

Alan explained that LEP students generally do not need help with English in his classes, except for occasional test or assignment directions, given that he conducts his upper-level Spanish courses mostly in Spanish.

As for recommendations to state-level educators and policymakers, Alan suggested restructuring the present testing situation:

> Teachers are doing remediation classes and are trying to work with these kids. I know the ENL teachers are really dedicated, hard-working people, but you can only do so much. Since the test is geared to native speakers of English, the Department of Education and the State Superintendent need to re-think the system.

Alan's proposal of restructuring is congruent with his view that the testing system is biased. LEP students are mandated to take the GQE who do not "have a basic grasp" of English. This is unfair to them, so educators must act by reforming the test, which is a part of "re-thinking the system."

Mary

Mary was a second-year teacher. The previous year she split her schedule between high school and middle school, so this was her first full year teaching at the high school level. She held a bachelor's degree and taught Spanish I and II.

Before we began the interview, I pulled up a chair to Mary's desk and sat across from her. She had been busy preparing lessons for the next school day.

Mary perceived that testing accommodations are not significantly beneficial to LEP students taking the GQE. She described her classroom experiences permitting students to use accommodations and the additional problems that bilingual dictionaries posed:

> I have my Spanish students translate from Spanish to English and it takes them the whole class period to do a paragraph because they have to use a dictionary. They write wrong words because there's more than one meaning for the words, plus contextual clues. Students don't get the contexts, so no, using a dictionary isn't going to help them.

Mary continued by talking about LEP students on the GQE:

> You have to have very specific understanding of vocabulary to know that there are multiple ways to say, 'Jimmy had four red shirts, he got three more, how many red shirts does he have now, or how many shirts, etc'. So, no, there's no way to 'level the playing field'. But honestly, there are some kids who are native English speakers that also never understand that.

Mary made it clear that she viewed testing accommodations as lacking. She shared that she does not make special accommodations for LEP students in her classroom, but allows all students to benefit from bilingual dictionaries, or from her reading test directions out loud.

As for recommendations, Mary suggested to the IDOE that they reconsider their objectives in testing:

> Are we [educators] trying to test students' reading ability or their English cognition? If we educators are trying to test students' reading ability and we know that they can read in Spanish, give students something to read in Spanish to test comprehension skills. If educators are testing English comprehension skills, give students something in English that is at the grade level where students are right now. There's no way that students who are reading at a third grade level are going to be able to read at a tenth grade level. And as for math, the word problems need to be adjusted. Picture problems might work, although some pictures aren't universal.

Mary, like other teachers, expressed her view that there is bias in the test language that needs to be adjusted for LEP students. She had no further recommendations for test writers and policymakers.

LEP Teachers: Karen, Silvia, Ilene, and Teri

Karen

Karen had 13 years' experience as a LEP teacher, with 21 years' experience total. She, like the other LEP teachers, taught only LEP students. She specialized in English and was teaching an English acquisition course called "English as a New Language." In addition, she taught a social studies class. Karen held a master's degree.

I met Karen in the late afternoon at a neighboring school where she was attending an all-day conference workshop. Because she tutors several students after school in her classroom, she felt it would be more productive to hold an interview on the conference day at a different school where we would not be distracted.

Karen thought that testing accommodations helped her students minimally. When I asked her if accommodations can "level the playing field," she responded:

> I appreciate that they [test makers] are trying to be fair; one example from last year's GQE concerned a willow tree. When students looked up the definition of a willow tree in their bilingual English to Spanish dictionaries, they didn't understand that particular word, nor did the teacher aide who was a native Spanish-speaker. This [lack of understanding] produced confusion for students and resulted in confusion in the classroom. For the test, any tree could have been used.

In addition to the concern about test language, Karen was alarmed that test makers assume that all students have a similar, shared background. She said, "[Test makers] assume everybody has an American cultural background and that all students are familiar with American culture and history." Karen recommended that test makers not hold to that assumption when creating tests.

I asked Karen which assessment tools she uses to evaluate her students. She shared that she requires students to submit portfolios as a way of demonstrating what they had learned. However, she was hesitant to accept the idea of state educators' adopting portfolios as an assessment practice for showing LEP student accountability. "My concern is that there would have to be extreme guidelines and training for evaluators. Students may need to be graded by more than one person, say, by three. And teachers would have to be well trained." Portfolios work well as an assessment tool in the classroom, but would require a more complicated process at the state level in order to be successful.

Silvia

Silvia had a master's degree with 13 years' experience in the classroom, approximately 10 years as a certified teacher at Grant High School. She began working with LEP students as a teacher's aide when she was in college. She was Hispanic and a Spanish speaker. Her main certification was in science. She taught biology, life science, and a course called "Health and Wellness." She also taught a Developmental Reading class. In addition, Silvia served as the LEP Department Chairperson, holding weekly meetings with her staff in the early morning hours before school. Her team of teachers worked hard to serve the special needs of LEP students at Grant.

Silvia was arranging the chairs in her science lab when I arrived for the interview after the final dismissal bell. We sat across from each other at one of the lab stations where she shared her insight on the testing process for LEP students as well as her perspectives on testing accommodations.

When I asked Silvia if she agreed with the IDOE that testing accommodations "level the playing field" in the test-taking situation, she replied, "No, I don't." She explained, “It takes approximately seven years to develop academic writing skills. Even though a student’s LAS[29] score might be [at LEP level] three, this does not mean that [the student’s] writing is at the level that is tested on the ISTEP.” She continued:

> Even if students test at level three and have to take the ISTEP, there’s still a lot of vocabulary that they don’t know or understand, including some of the idioms. They also don’t understand some of the cultural references and they don’t understand all of the meanings of the words. And then some students still struggle with reading comprehension. It takes time to develop the academic level in a language.

Silvia discussed how testing accommodations are not enough to be significantly beneficial for her students. Therefore, she chooses to modify her classroom tests when she deems it necessary:

> Usually when we [she and the class] test, we modify almost everything. For example, if we have a test in Biology I, I look at the test and if it’s difficult, I modify or simplify the language to a degree. Because of how they’re stated, test questions can be really tricky if you’re not a native speaker of English.

Silvia recommended that educators test LEP students “in their native language, if they’re going to test LEP students at all.” She suggested that educators “use a different format, or a different test entirely, one that is more appropriate to students’ level of speaking.”

Ilene

In addition to 3 years’ experience as a LEP teacher at Grant, Ilene had 6 and a half years’ prior experience as an assistant teacher before becoming certified. Her subject

[29] “LAS” is a reference to the “LAS Links” exam that incoming students to the LEP program must take in order to be assessed and approved for the appropriate LEP level of instruction.

area was mathematics and she held a bachelor's degree. She taught Geometry, Pre-Algebra, Algebra One, and a mathematics lab. Ilene came to the United States from Eastern Europe. She discussed some of the challenges she faced as an English language learner and how, because of those challenges, she could personally relate to her own students' struggles with language.

When I asked Ilene if testing accommodations make a "level playing field" for LEP students taking the GQE, she shook her head and said, "I don't know how we can make [the playing field] be even. I don't have any recommendations or suggestions."

Ilene discussed the limited benefits of testing accommodations for LEP students on the GQE, including her role as LEP instructor:

> We [LEP teachers] usually read directions to our students. We are allowed to read directions over and over again, but we cannot explain examples or how to do problems or give any hints. But we can make sure that students understand what they are asked to do. Also, students need to be familiar with [the proctors]. They are more comfortable with us [LEP teachers]. The LEP department always tests together as a team. Therefore, our students are always with their teachers. I don't read directions often because of my hard accent. It's always better for a native English speaker to read directions. Students also use word-to-word bilingual dictionaries during testing.

Ilene continued:

> If students come to the LEP program as seniors in our school, they still have to take the test with few chances to pass it. Therefore, offering 50% extra time may help. The dictionaries are not much help because they're word to word dictionaries, only. Students still have to know the meanings of the sentences.

As far as using testing accommodations in her classroom, Ilene explained how she has changed her curriculum to include more standardized tests. She incorporates some of the same accommodations sanctioned by the state on the GQE since her goal is to familiarize her students with this type of testing format to better prepare students to meet GQE testing standards: "I try to give students more practice standardized tests. I also try to review what I think students are going to need to know to do well." She continued, "I decide which parts of the lessons are important. If we have time, I'll go deeper into the

lesson. I feel students are shorted in that area [depth of study] because so many students need a slower pace."

Ilene had one recommendation to higher level educators: "If you allow us smaller classes, we would be able help more students. If I could spend more time with each individual student that would make a big difference, given that we have to reach all students."

Teri

Teri had 11 years' total teaching experience with 6 as a high school LEP teacher at Grant. She had a master's degree and taught social studies. She specifically taught United States government and United States history, as well as English and a course called "English as a New Language."

Teri's response to the question as to whether testing accommodations "level the playing field" for LEP students, was a firm, "No I don't think so." She explained her position:

> I think the major issue regarding our own students is the language that is used on the test. There is a lot of idiomatic language and a lot of specialized language. Even if our kids have a very good vocabulary, they might only be familiar with two idioms, not the other two which are used on the test. I don't think the test is fair because of our students' [limited] vocabulary level.

Teri continued talking about the limitations of testing accommodations:

> This is not a question of students' intelligence or their ability. And simply giving students a word-to-word dictionary, sometimes those words aren't in the dictionary. One word that was brought up the other day was "sneakers." The kids all know what tennis shoes are, but the test used the word "sneakers." That's not in a bilingual dictionary.

Teri finished:

> They [test makers] need to look at the type of language that they use. I went through some of the sample questions in the booklet and the words that [test makers] were asking and said, "My kids aren't going to know this, they're not going to know this word, and this word." And it turns out that those words were the exact words students had to know to answer the question. Had the question been phrased differently, students wouldn't have had a problem.

Teri summed up her concern about perceived test language bias: "The bias that I see is the language bias. I haven't looked for [other biases] because those aren't the biggest issues right now."

Teri incorporates several of the state-sanctioned testing accommodations for student use during classroom time:

> Students generally have as much time as they need for tests. I usually plan on students taking a certain amount of time based on what I think they should take. Usually, they're under the time. Dictionaries are on the shelf. Students can always access the dictionaries if they need to look things up. If they don't understand questions, I explain the questions to them. We talk about what the words mean.

One accommodation that Teri provides in her classroom, aside from testing, is for Spanish speakers to work with a tutor: "We have a tutor who comes to class three times a week for students who are Spanish speakers." She continued, "My Spanish is pretty limited, so I try not to translate often. Instead, I'll say, 'go to the dictionary,' or 'go to a friend,' that type of thing, rather than 'go to the home language.'" Teri is reluctant to encourage students to return to their home languages because this practice would be counterproductive to her work as an English language instructor, which is to promote the use and understanding of the English language.

As a recommendation to state educators, Teri articulated that she was in favor of incorporating multiple assessments, in addition to using the GQE as an assessment. She said, "I really like the idea of using multiple assessments; I think it is better than having just one high-stakes test. I am not a big fan of 'do or die' tests." Even so, she hesitated, as did her LEP colleague, Karen, a few days earlier, at the suggestion of state educators permitting portfolios as an official assessment. She continued, "The issue I have is with validity and accountability. Is the work actually the student's or did the teachers help by correcting grammar and then putting [the corrected versions] in the portfolios?"

Teri also agreed with Karen that before alternate assessments could become a state-wide consideration for student assessment, the state would need to invest in teacher and evaluator training to ensure validity for high-stakes evaluation.

Personal Anecdotes: Teachers' Reflections on Language and Culture Differences

Some teachers volunteered personal anecdotes relating multicultural experiences. I did not elicit teachers to share these stories. Because several respondents chose to tell them, I developed "Personal Anecdotes" as a theme. These stories did not integrate well with the other themes, since they were less fundamental to the central research question: teachers' perceptions on testing accommodations for students taking the GQE. However, I deem teachers' personal accounts of multicultural experiences to be worthy to include, since they give unconventional insight into how teachers relate to students. The end result is to present the anecdotes here, as a section by themselves at the end of the chapter.

A few of the teacher respondents in this study came from multicultural backgrounds. Some were raised in other countries speaking a language other than English; others grew up in bilingual households or experienced first hand what it was like to be a second-language learner through foreign language study. Some teachers had close family members who had struggled with understanding language and cultural differences. During interviews, teachers often referred to personal experiences, or experiences of close family members, that had helped enrich their understanding of the struggles that some students endure with language and culture.

Most teachers discussed experiences with language and culture struggles in light of sharing perspectives on bias. Ilene, who came from Eastern Europe, spoke in earnest about her sons' difficulties shortly after they arrived in the United States:

> When I came here my sons were 19 and 23. After they started college I asked them if they had any friends. They said all their friends were Americans. I asked them why they didn't go and hang out with their American friends. They said,

> "We don't understand their jokes." After a few years I asked my son if he understood the jokes now. He said, "Yes I do, but I can't respond so fast." This conversation always stays with me. My sons were able to learn language faster than older people, and still it took time.

Ilene's own background as an English language learner has provided her with personal insight into the struggles her students endure with language acquisition. Although Ilene is a certified mathematics teacher, she prefers to teach exclusively LEP students.

Monica, who taught Spanish, was born and raised in Mexico and came to live in the United States when she was in high school. She saw herself as an illustration of someone who had risen through the ranks of U.S. schooling as a bilingual student, encountering struggles similar to the LEP students at Grant:

> I'm a perfect example of someone who has had to learn English and be tested in it. I'm not saying that success [on tests] can't be accomplished, but I know what the struggles are. When I came here, my accent wasn't that bad, so teachers assumed that I spoke English. I was thrown into regular English classes. I struggled like crazy.

Monica talked about the differences in English vocabulary from where she began learning the language as a student living in southern California compared to her present experience teaching in northern Indiana:

> I was familiar with the vocabulary that is used in the small Imperial Valley [in California]. When I moved up here, it was completely different. As far as testing goes, maybe you could test according to the region – different standards and vocabulary for different groups. I think it would be fair. To me, if you ask me to describe 'slushy', it's a drink. And 'lake-effect [weather]' – I didn't learn that until I moved up here. This is completely different vocabulary from what I was dealing with. These kinds of struggles [with language] were reality for me. I know the same situations for kids who have just come here. I know what they're going through.

Monica's suggestion of testing students using regional standards might have been beneficial to Mary's mother, who, as a child from Alaska, found herself attending elementary school in Georgia:

> My mom tells a story. She grew up in Alaska and at home they never raked leaves. During her second grade year, her family took a trip across the U.S. and she went to school in Georgia. She was expected to do an exercise in reading comprehension where there was a picture of a black man raking leaves. In Alaska, in the 1950s, there were no black people and she didn't know what raking leaves was all about. So, for kids that are fresh here, what is a garage to a person

> from the south, a carport? What is a Piggly Wiggly to a person that lives up north? You can't expect students to perform when they've only been here a couple of months. And you don't want to scare the crap out of them: 'Here, welcome to the U.S. Have a test!'

Like Mary's mom, Don's wife, although born and raised in the United States, experienced an early childhood different from many of her peers. She was a first-generation American citizen and only began learning English as a child at school:

> My wife was the first one in her family to be born in the States. Her father was Russian, and her mother German, from Yugoslavia. My wife didn't actually speak English until she started school in the late 50s. She speaks, or understands, German, Serbian, and Russian, because these languages were all spoken in her home. Her parents had heavy accents and never did become strong English speakers. My wife had to learn to adapt.

Don, who teaches English, prefaced his discussion on his wife's heritage by talking about how, in his opinion, students who come from multi-language homes do not practice English often enough outside of school. When asked if he could identify bias in the testing system, Don stated that he supposed it existed because the test is written in Standard English, and so many students have not learned to adapt to speaking the language, as his wife had, when she was a child.

Spanish teachers, Ted and Alan, made several references to how learning a second language has helped them understand the plight of LEP students at Grant. When talking about testing accommodations, Alan said, "I know from having to take a test in a language I was learning that just by giving me a little extra time didn't mean that I was understanding what I was doing." Ted referred to being a second-language learner when discussing bias in the testing system: "Some of what I say is from a personal point of view, having been a language learner and having been a language teacher and also dealing with the ESL students."

Ted, as well as Ilene, Monica, Mary, and Alan, reflected on their own personal backgrounds as second-language learners – backgrounds that they credited with enhancing their understanding of LEP students' struggles with language. Some of these teachers struggled with understanding cultural differences personally, as in how to "fit

in" as a newcomer living in the United States. Teachers shared their backgrounds as a way of demonstrating that they possessed personal experience as well as knowledge as educators when working with students who have encountered many of the same hurdles that they have faced.

Conclusion

Chapter V is an analysis of the findings from this chapter. Although teachers generally spoke with conviction, they were most passionate when explaining their perspectives about whether, or the extent to which, testing accommodations are beneficial to LEP students taking the GQE. Several teachers who doubted the inclusion of testing accommodations to make a significant difference supported their views by citing bias in the testing system. A smaller number of teachers voiced opposing views, claiming that there was indisputably no bias in the testing system. The findings not only illustrate the teachers' ambivalence, but show the depths of their struggles in trying to work with a testing system that many view to be educationally unsound.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter reviews the findings from Chapter IV, summarizes the five major themes of the study, and offers recommendations for further research.

The main goal of this study was to elicit teachers' perspectives on testing accommodations for LEP students taking Indiana's GQE. Teachers reviewed the IDOE's statement that the purpose of accommodations is to "level the playing field" between LEP students and their non-LEP peers (IDOE, 2006, ISTEP+ Program Manual, 2006-2007). Teachers shared in individual interviews their perspectives on the meaning of a "level playing field," and whether testing accommodations can or do create "a level playing field" for LEP students taking the exam. I also asked teachers to share whether they implement testing accommodations in their classrooms, and if they have ever invented accommodations for classroom use. I concluded by asking the respondents to provide their recommendations on how educators can help LEP students succeed on the GQE.

Summary

I interviewed 14 high school teachers of mathematics, English/language arts, Spanish, and LEP from Grant High School in Indiana to learn about their perspectives on whether testing accommodations "level the playing field" for LEP students on the GQE. Teachers were generous in sharing their viewpoints. Some interviews lasted longer than others, as several teachers were occupied with after-school activities such tutoring students, writing lesson plans, setting up language and science labs, eating a late lunch, and instructing a student teacher. As the interviewer, I was careful not to lead teachers in their responses, as I discussed in Chapter III. I was also aware that most teachers had limited time to dedicate to an interview. Therefore, I often asked questions in general terms. The result is that some teachers gave more general responses, whereas others were

more detailed in their descriptions. Detailed responses were more common when the respondents recounted specific incidents in their lives, sometimes telling of family members or students who invoked a personal connection to teaching situations. For this reason, I included a separate section in the findings chapter for teacher anecdotes.

Five themes emerged from the data that I collected from the interviews:

1. Testing Accommodations as an Equalizer in Testing
2. Perceptions of Bias in the Testing Situation
3. Teachers' Independent Uses of Testing Accommodations
4. Teachers' Recommendations to State Educators and Policymakers
5. Personal Anecdotes: Teachers' Reflections on Language and Culture Differences

Theme 1 addressed the central research question: teachers' perspectives on testing accommodations for LEP students taking the GQE. Teachers shared their observations about the IDOE's statement that the purpose of accommodations is to "level the playing field" between LEP students and their non-LEP peers (IDOE, 2006, ISTEP+ Program Manual, 2006-2007). They discussed whether the IDOE's intent is for accommodations to serve as equalizer in the test-taking situation. They shared whether accommodations can fulfill this purpose, and if so, to what extent. Most teachers thought that accommodations were helpful but fail to create, in their eyes, a "level playing field."

Theme 2 emerged from the teachers' discussion of bias. Some teachers cited the presence of bias as the reason why they could not support the notion that the use of testing accommodations is sufficient as an equalizer. For example, LEP teacher, Karen, shared that accommodations help LEP students only "minimally" because test writers do not have LEP students in mind when creating tests. She recounted an example of a test question about a willow tree, where many of her students neither understood the word "willow" nor were familiar with this northern species of tree. Karen pointed to bias as the reason for inferior LEP student performance.

In Theme 3, teachers shared how they incorporated testing accommodations in their classroom curricula, apart from the GQE. For example, Ilene explained how she has changed her curriculum to include more standardized tests. She incorporates some of the same accommodations approved by the state on the GQE since her goal is to familiarize her students with this type of testing format to better prepare students to meet GQE testing standards.

In Theme 4, teachers' recommendations to state educators and policymakers about how to equalize the testing situation included ideas about introducing new exams in other languages, such as a written test in the Spanish language for Spanish-speaking students, and incorporating alternate means of assessments. For example, Mary suggested that the IDOE test reading comprehension skills of Spanish-speaking LEP students in Spanish, rather than in English. And Teri supported incorporating multiple assessments in addition to using the GQE.

Theme 5 addressed teachers' reflections on language and culture differences. These personal anecdotes did not integrate well with the other themes, since they were less fundamental to the central research question: teachers' perceptions on testing accommodations for students taking the GQE. For this reason, I presented them as a section by themselves at the end of Chapter 4. Several teachers shared stories of how they or family members struggled with language and culture differences in ways that were similar to the students in their classrooms, hence relating to LEP students' predicaments.

All five themes were connected to understanding teachers' perspectives on testing accommodations for LEP students taking the GQE. By studying emergent themes, I was able to make sense of the data in light of this central research question.

Implications of the Findings

Grant High School reflects the national trend of schools[30] that utilize exit exams to help determine student graduation. One major reason why Grant relies on the use of exit exams is because the school is located within a state whose Department of Education subscribes to such a system (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). Hence, educators, students, parents, and other education stakeholders must learn to achieve success within the exit exam system rather than to expect alternate routes toward graduation.

The IDOE expects LEP students, like other students, to perform adequately on the GQE or risk not qualifying for a high school diploma. The IDOE is in league with other states that offer few alternate paths to graduation for non-traditional students (CEP, 2006, "State High School Exit Exams: States Try Harder, But Gaps Persist"). As I discussed in Chapter I, LEP learners with extremely limited English language skills can apply for and receive test waivers from the IDOE. The majority of LEP students must take the GQE, even if test preparations indicate the likelihood that these students may not pass the exam. Test results reveal that LEP students at Grant consistently scored lower than their peers on the GQE. Grant High School keeps pace with national findings that show that LEP students average lower pass rates than their non-LEP peers (State High School Exit Exams Put to the Test, 2003; Swanson, 2004).

As I described earlier, most LEP students at Grant High School spoke Spanish as their primary language. The 2000 Census indicated that 6.4% of Indiana residents spoke a primary language other than English and that 52% of these speakers spoke Spanish. The residents of Midfield, where Grant is located, had a 10% higher rate of Spanish speakers than the state average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). This is in keeping with the finding that most immigrants live in urban areas (Chiswick & Miller, 2004). Fix and Passel (2003) at the Urban Institute claimed that as of 2000, 58% of immigrants to the

[30] In Chapter I, I discussed in greater detail state trends to adopt exit exams.

United States were from Latin America, the majority of whom were Spanish speakers. In 1990, 51% of immigrants came from Latin America whereas only 26% did so in 1970 (Fix & Passel, 2003). Similarly, over the past 10 years, Grant High School has experienced a growth in Hispanic student population. Hispanic student enrollment at Grant increased from 10% in 1998 to 17% in 2008 (IDOE, 2010). It is important to note that although a significant portion of the Hispanic student population at Grant is comprised of LEP students, not all Hispanics are LEP learners or immigrant children. The increase in Grant's Hispanic student enrollment mirrors the national trend of growing Hispanic populations.

As I stated in Chapter I, the U.S. GAO (2006) issued a report calling for additional research on accommodations that would ultimately help states improve their assessments of LEP students. The office reported that research is lacking on which testing accommodations are appropriate and effective in improving the validity of assessment outcomes (GAO, 2006). Grant High School is one of many schools to utilize testing accommodations, a practice which, according to the GAO, has yet to be proved scientifically sound.

One argument in favor of testing accommodations has been to point to the popularity of the practice, which has grown from several hundred schools in the 1970s to the present decade in which two out of three U.S. high school students have to pass an exit exam to qualify for their diplomas (Warren, Grodsky, & Lee, 2008). These "popularity arguments" are not based on evidence from empirical data. The lack of research supporting the use of testing accommodations makes the practice all the more questionable. Without further research into accommodations' effectiveness, U.S. schools like Grant will continue to "put the cart before the horse" by retaining the practice of using accommodations before relying on evidential research to support it.

I found that the teachers in this study were not so much against the practice of LEP students using testing accommodations on the GQE as they were against

implementing a high-stakes test with enough importance to determine whether students qualify for graduation. During their individual interviews, teachers perceived it unfortunate that accommodations were not enough to make a significant difference to elevate LEP students' scores to those of their peers, considering the importance the IDOE places on passing the GQE. Even so, given the choice, teachers were in favor of permitting accommodations rather than not offering them at all.

Interviewees' responses showcased the internal struggle teachers experienced trying to balance mandates from the State while, at the same time, preserving unique teaching practices. This conflict came to light when teachers discussed how they must adhere to IDOE practices, such as offering testing accommodations, even though they perceived accommodations as inadequate to significantly raise test scores.

Even though most respondents disagreed with the practice of exit exams, a couple did not. The 2 teachers out of 14 who dissented from the majority viewpoint were in favor of using the GQE as a tool for separating high-achieving students from low-scoring peers. One teacher argued that students can use GQE scores on job applications or to apply for college scholarships. In other words, high scores can be of service to high-achieving students which, in this view, renders the exit exam a success.

Most teachers, however, focused on the wide performance gap between low and high achieving students and how only a few students at the top could use their scores to benefit from such a system. Teachers discussed how the present system rewards high achievers while expecting lower achievers to engage in "extra time-consuming tasks" during the exam, namely, using accommodations. But not all teachers agreed. One claimed that LEP students profit from the use of a bilingual dictionary (a state-sanctioned accommodation) and argued that dictionaries might be helpful for non-LEP students, too. This teacher questioned whether LEP students receive privileges that others do not. Most teachers, however, viewed the practice of testing accommodations as a "necessary evil" as long as non-native English-speaking students are required to take the exam.

Teachers generally reflected the wariness of scholars who warn against implementing a system of accommodations that, although widespread, has not been proved by researchers to be scientifically sound. Without further research into the effectiveness of testing accommodations and the benefits of exit exams, schools like Grant are likely to continue to administer high-stakes tests to all demographics of students without possessing a firm understanding of the process or potential consequences.

Conclusions

The results of the interviews showed that teachers were most opinionated and verbose when they disclosed their views on the central research question (i.e., related their perspectives on testing accommodations), discussed bias in the testing system, and shared personal anecdotes. Teachers also had numerous ideas and recommendations for improving the testing situation. The following is a review of the data.

Although most teachers stated that testing accommodations are not sufficient to significantly raise test scores, they were in favor of retaining accommodations for LEP students rather than not offering them at all. When I asked teachers whether accommodations contribute a small, moderate, or large amount to student success, most answered “small.” Several teachers stated that students who are language deficient need more than accommodations to succeed on the GQE. Some teachers emphasized that test preparation is most important; teachers must prepare LEP students to perform well before taking the test rather than rely on accommodations to even the scores.

Some teachers were discouraged that the IDOE has continued to maintain the stance that accommodations work. Some teachers felt that the IDOE’s support for accommodations has denied any room for change or improvement. However, most teachers did not single out the IDOE by name as the agency in need of change. Some teachers were nebulous about their targets saying, for example, “They need to make a better test.” Or, as one teacher said when discussing AYP and student academic

improvement, “I think what they do is compare your growth.” The teachers’ impersonal use of “they” shows a distance between the classroom teacher and state-level educators. This separation illustrates that teachers tend to feel removed from higher-level decisions in education that affect them.

Most teachers suggested that there is bias in the testing process, particularly for LEP and other special needs students. The 2 teachers who refuted the existence of bias had each taught for over 20 years and possessed experience in test writing and analysis at the state level. Their first-hand knowledge of the formative and analytical aspects of testing may have been the reason why they did not side with other teachers’ claims of test bias. However, it is worth noting that the other respondents did not indicate in their interviews whether they, too, possessed experience in test writing or analysis at the state level. Therefore, it is impossible to conclude that teachers with experience writing and analyzing state-level exams are more likely to discredit the notion that bias exists in the testing process.

Teachers’ claims of bias may reflect a general wariness, or even distrust, of high-ranking educators and administrators. Teachers may view senior educators as stripping them of their educational powers by mandating that teachers spend classroom time preparing students to achieve success on a high-stakes test that teachers may not fully trust or support. The shift of placing curricular policy in the hands of state-level legislators and educators away from local control “bespeaks a profound mistrust of teachers and administrators” (Apple, 1990, p. 529). The result is that teachers are left feeling confused about the reasons for state-mandated testing, mistrustful of state education departments and state legislators, and doubtful of the tests’ effectiveness in evaluating student achievement and accuracy as a tool of measurement (Brown in Cimbricz, 2002). It is therefore not surprising that when I asked whether they could identify bias in the testing process, many teachers did not hesitate to describe a testing system that they found to be riddled with unfair procedures and with questions tainted by

language and cultural bias. This predominantly skeptical view toward standardized testing brings into question which redeeming qualities, if any, teachers found in the GQE. The hours that teachers spend preparing students to succeed on standardized tests takes away from traditional classroom instructional time. Teachers' efforts to maintain their own unique teaching practices while at the same time satisfying mandates from the IDOE, highlight their struggles to balance individual education agendas with those of the State.

Teachers' recommendations for improving the testing situation generally centered on creating what would be, in their views, a system of fairness for all students. Most teachers pointed to bias as being problematic for LEP students. One teacher said: "Students may understand a concept in their native language but not know how to transfer it into another code." Some teachers discussed the benefits of students taking the test in Spanish, specifically because most LEP students at Grant High School were Spanish speakers. However, the skill of speaking Spanish did not automatically equip students to take exams in that language without possessing an understanding of Spanish grammar. Ethical questions and complications could arise if the IDOE granted Spanish-speakers the right to take the GQE in their native language, yet denied that right to non-Spanish-speaking LEP students.

Teachers also discussed modifying or simplifying test language for LEP students. Some shared that they do so, anyway, on classroom tests, but are not permitted to make language modifications for students on the GQE.

Some respondents talked about the value of multiple assessments as a tool for state evaluation in place of or in addition to the GQE. A few teachers viewed the GQE as having too much power as the definitive assessment. Those who were in favor of multiple assessments talked about the pros and cons of student portfolios, and also the advantages of test-language modifications, extra test preparation time for LEP students, and teacher recommendations as valuable components of student assessment.

Several teachers generously shared personal anecdotes that related to struggles with culture and language differences. Although these anecdotes are less essential to the central research question (teachers' perceptions on testing accommodations for students taking the GQE), they are valuable because they document teachers' voices describing how they have personally related to the plights of their students. Many stories centered on the teachers themselves or on their family members who came from other countries and had to learn new skills in order to adapt. Teachers turned to relating anecdotes during interviews as a way of understanding and comparing their own struggles with language and culture to those of their students.

Recommendations for Expansion of Study and Further Research

As I stated in Chapter I, government offices such as the GAO and research institutions like the CEEE have recommended that further research be conducted on the effectiveness of testing accommodations. This research study is presented in response to the recommendation, although it is limited in scope to data collected from one school. The following are studies that could extend this research and could potentially have a positive impact on future policy.

As I reported, the findings from my research suggest that teachers overwhelmingly perceive testing accommodations as incapable of serving as an equalizer for LEP students in the test-taking situation. In their interviews, some teachers voiced their frustration at being obligated to adhere to a practice that they perceived to be ineffective (not to mention, scientifically unsupported, as research suggests.) Only limited studies have included teachers' voices. Future research should include teachers discussing how they satisfy mandates from the State while, at the same time, preserve their own teaching practice. This study highlighted on a small scale the internal struggles to balance state testing mandates with individual teaching objectives. Apple discussed the "profound mistrust of teachers and administrators" toward state-level legislators who

control curricular policy (Apple, 1990, p. 529). Kelly suggested that teachers are resistant toward state mandates in education because they view themselves as targets of coercion, a method whose benefits he questions: "Because coercion may bring about a degree of compliance, we are sometimes misled into thinking it is producing the result we desire" (Kelly, 1999, p. 543). Researchers must continue to publish findings on the merits of statewide testing, as well as the beneficiaries of this kind of system. More studies are needed to understand how state departments of education profit from standardized testing (since the practice is so widespread.) Also, the roles of teachers and how they perceive themselves as part of the process is worthy of further investigation.

As for convincing teachers and other educators to support the continuance of testing accommodations, researchers will need to provide empirical evidence of how accommodations aid LEP learners in the testing situation. State-level educators will also need to invest time and money to effectively train education personnel to use the accommodations, including studying which accommodations work best in particular situations. Presently, accommodations training, where it exists, is informal and varies among schools. More research is needed to understand whether this particular case study, focused solely on one school in Indiana, is representative of situations in other schools in other states.

It is, perhaps, only a matter of time before testing accommodations become relegated to the history annals of standardized testing as more studies reveal their ineffectiveness and the tests are replaced by improved, scientifically based, and less divisive ways to measure student performance. In the meantime, educators must remain committed to creating and maintaining fair and unbiased evaluation standards for all groups of learners.

APPENDIX A

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AYP	Adequate Yearly Progress
CEEE	Center for Equity and Excellence in Education
CEP	Center on Educational Policy
ELL	English Language Learner
ESL	English as a Second Language
GAO	Government Accountability Office
GE	General Education
GED	General Educational Development
GQE	Graduation Qualifying Exam
IDOE	Indiana Department of Education
ILP	Individual Learning Plan
IPASS	Indiana Performance Assessment for Student Success
ISTEP+	Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress Plus
K-12	Kindergarten thru 12th Grade
LAS Links	Language Assessment System Links
LEP	Limited English Proficient
NCES	National Center for Education Statistics
NCLB	No Child Left Behind

APPENDIX B

PROJECT DESCRIPTION LETTER

FOR IRB USE ONLY
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Dear _____

My name is Angela Hetler and I am currently conducting doctoral research on LEP teachers' perspectives on the effectiveness of testing accommodations for their students on the GQE. I recently had the privilege of teaching adult LEP in the evenings (in addition to teaching Spanish at X High School during the day) which fueled my interest and appreciation for all that you do.

I am writing to ask if you would graciously participate in my study. My goal is to understand more about what LEP teachers genuinely think about testing accommodations and the extent to which they help students achieve on the GQE.

Enrollment in this study would require a commitment of approximately one to one and a half hours for a one-time interview with me. I can meet with you at your school or at another place of your choosing. I request to tape record the interview and then transcribe the interview from the tape. Your name will be changed at the time of transcription to ensure anonymity. All tapes will be erased after they are transcribed. I will use no proper names in my reporting of research results. There is no foreseeable risk in your participation, nor is there a cost, and you are free to terminate the interview at any time.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please fill out the information below and I will contact you in the next two weeks to set up an interview at a time and place that is convenient for you. Please feel free to contact me with any questions that you may have at the email address or phone number below.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of participating in my project.

Sincerely,

Angela D. Hetler
Doctoral Candidate, Social Foundations of Education
University of Iowa
angela-hetler@uiowa.edu

_____ Yes, I am interested in participating in your study

_____ No, I am not interested in participating in your study

Name: _____ Email (optional) _____

Best time to call you at school: _____

Please Return to Me at X High School through School Mail. Thank You.

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

FOR IRB USE ONLY
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INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title: **Indiana High School LEP Teachers' Perspectives on the Effectiveness of Testing Accommodations for Students Taking the Graduation Qualifying Exam: Insights from One Mid-Sized City**
Research Team: **Angela Hetler, BA, MA**

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

This is a research study. I am inviting you to participate in it because you have experience teaching and/or counseling Limited English Proficient (LEP) students at the high school level.

The purpose of this research project is to examine LEP educators' perspectives on the effectiveness of testing accommodations for students who take the Graduation Qualifying Exam (GQE). There is a shared common belief among federal and state-level educators that more research is needed to better understand appropriate testing accommodations for LEP students. This study is part of my doctoral dissertation program

HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL PARTICIPATE?

Approximately 20 educators are being asked to participate.

HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THIS STUDY?

If you agree to participate, your involvement will consist of an approximately one-hour interview at your convenience at your school, or at a place of your choosing. I may contact you to follow-up with questions I might have.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY?

I will ask you questions about testing accommodations for your students on the GQE. I will include questions about your experiences with accommodations, your views on their effectiveness, their feasibility to implement, among other related items.

After the interview I may follow up with a phone call to clarify any questions that might remain.

Please know that you are free to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. You also are free to stop participating anytime you wish.

Audio Recording

One aspect of this study involves making audio recordings of your interview with the researchers. With your permission I will record our interview to transcribe at a later date. I will then destroy the only copy. If you are uncomfortable with a tape recorder, I will take hand-written notes only.

You may be in this study without agreeing to the audio recording of your interview. Please indicate your preference below.

[ ] Yes [ ] No I give you permission to make audio recordings of me during this study.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THIS STUDY?

You may experience one or more of the risks indicated below from being in this study. There may be unknown risks, or risks that we did not anticipate, associated with being in this study.

Talking about your experiences with accommodation may make you feel self-conscious or uncomfortable. You are free to skip any question you don't want to answer or end the interview at any time.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?

You may not benefit personally from participating in this study. However, we hope that in the future other people might benefit from this study because the information collected may be used to improve the testing accommodations for LEP students.

WILL IT COST ME ANYTHING TO BE IN THIS STUDY?

You will not have any costs by participating in this research study.

WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING?

You will not be paid for participating in this research study.

WHO IS FUNDING THIS STUDY?

Neither the University nor the researcher is receiving payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

WHAT ABOUT CONFIDENTIALITY?

My advisors and I will keep your participation in this research study confidential to the extent permitted by law. However, it is possible that other people such as those indicated

below may become aware of your participation in this study and may inspect and copy records pertaining to this research. Some of these records could contain information that personally identifies you.

- federal government regulatory agencies,
- auditing departments of the University of Iowa, and
- the University of Iowa's Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies)

However, I will not identify individuals by name in my records. I will use a pseudonym to identify your responses. The pseudonym I assign to you will be linked to your name. The list linking your name and your study pseudonym will be stored in a separate location that is accessible only to the researchers. All records will be maintained in locked files or in password protected computer files. If I write a report or an article about this study I will describe the study results in such a way that you will not be identified.

IS BEING IN THIS STUDY VOLUNTARY?

Taking part in this research study is completely voluntary. If you decide to be a part, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study you will not be penalized or lose any benefits for which you otherwise qualify.

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

You are encouraged to ask questions. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact: Angela Hetler at XXX-XXX-XXXX. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. David Bills, at XXX-XXX-XXXX. If you experience a research-related injury, please contact David Bills at the above number (XXX-XXX-XXXX).

If you have questions about the rights of research subjects of research related injury, please contact the Human Subjects Office, 300 College of Medicine Administration Building, The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, 52242, 319-335-6564, or email irb@uiowa.edu. General information about being a research subject can be found by clicking "For Research Subjects" on the Human Subjects Office website: http://research.uiowa.edu/hso To offer input about your experiences as a research subject or to speak to someone other than the research staff, call the Human Subjects Office at the number above.

This Informed Consent Document is not a contract. It is a written explanation of what will happen during the study if you decide to participate. You are not waiving any legal rights by signing this Informed Consent Document. Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Subject's Name (printed):
_____

Do not sign this form if today's date is on or after $STAMP_EXP_DT .

_____
(Signature of Subject) (Date)

Statement of Person Who Obtained Consent

I have discussed the above points with the subject or, where appropriate, with the subject's legally authorized representative. It is my opinion that the subject understands the risks, benefits, and procedures involved with participation in this research study.

_____
(Signature of Person who Obtained Consent) (Date)

APPENDIX D

IDOE TEST ACCOMMODATIONS

Accommodations for LEP students levels 1-4 (permitted but not documented on the ISTEP+ *Student Information Questionnaire*)

Timing and Scheduling	Response Format	Setting and Environment	Presentation Format
• Student provided additional breaks as necessary • Test administered in several sessions • Additional breaks between tests, if necessary		• Student is tested in a small group setting • Student is tested individually	• Student has directions read to him or her • Student has test administered by a familiar test administrator

Accommodations for LEP students levels 1-4 (permitted but documented on the ISTEP+ *Student Information Questionnaire*)

Timing and Scheduling	Response Format	Setting and Environment	Presentation Format
• Student is provided extended testing time for each test session. (A timeframe, such as 50% more time or double time, should be set.)	• Student uses an approved word-to-word bilingual dictionary.		• All test questions are read to the student (except those that measure Reading Comprehension). • Math test items and answer options are read verbatim (in English) to student.

Source: Indiana Department of Education. (2006). *ISTEP+ Program Manual 2006-2007*. Retrieved from http://www.doe.state.in.us/istep/ProgramManual.html

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

Professional Background
(To understand length / depth of teaching experience)

1. Including this school year, how many years have you taught English / Mathematics?

2. Including this year, how many years have you taught at the high school level?

LEP Contact
(To understand teachers' awareness of LEP student presence)

1. Do you have daily contact with LEP students?
   - If so, in what ways do you interact with LEP students?

2. Are you aware that LEP students are placed in levels?
   - If so, what do you know how that process works?

LEP Evaluation
(To understand teachers' experience in evaluating LEP students)

1. Do you have LEP students in the academic classes you teach?
   - If so, what levels of LEP students do you instruct?
   - If so, do LEP students take exactly the same test in your classes as general education students?
     - If not, how is the LEP test different from the general education test?
     - Describe the alternative test for LEP students.
     - What rationale do you use in deciding to create a different test for LEP students?

2. Describe how LEP students perform in comparison to general education students.

3. Do you evaluate LEP students differently from general education students (i.e. Do you use different standards)?
   - If so, describe your evaluation process.

LEP GQE Testing and Accommodations
(To understand teachers' background / training regarding LEP students)

1. Have you ever proctored the GQE exam in which there were LEP students?
   - Were LEP students a homogeneous group or were they heterogeneously mixed with general education students?

- Do you know the rationale for this?

2. Have you ever proctored the GQE exam specifically for LEP students?
   - If so, were you aware of testing accommodations for LEP students?
     - Where did you first hear of testing accommodations?

3. Describe any training you have received on the use any of these testing accommodations. (As I show teachers the charts, I explain that "not documented" means testing accommodations are not specified in students' Individualized Learning Plans [ILPs]. Conversely, for students to use "documented accommodations," they must have approval from their LEP teacher in their ILPs.)

Chart A: Accommodations for LEP students levels 1-4 (permitted, but **not documented,** on the ISTEP+ *Student Information Questionnaire*)

Timing and Scheduling	Response Format	Setting and Environment	Presentation Format
• Student provided additional breaks as necessary • Test administered in several sessions • Additional breaks between tests, if necessary		• Student is tested in a small group setting • Student is tested individually	• Student has directions read to him or her • Student has test administered by a familiar test administrator

Chart B: Accommodations for LEP students levels 1-4 (permitted, but **documented,** on the ISTEP+ *Student Information Questionnaire*)

Timing and Scheduling	Response Format	Setting and Environment	Presentation Format
• Student is provided extended testing time for each test session. (A timeframe, such as 50% more time or double time, should be set.)	• Student uses an approved word-to-word bilingual dictionary.		• All test questions are read to the student (except those that measure Reading Comprehension). • Math test items and answer options are read verbatim (in English) to student.

4. Have you accommodated an LEP student in any of these categories? Explain.

5. In your experience, which accommodations work best at helping LEP students achieve success? Explain.

6. Are some accommodations lacking? Explain.

7. Are there modifications you would make to the list of state-approved accommodations on either of the two charts? Explain.

8. If so, describe how these modifications would contribute to student success on the GQE.

9. Besides testing accommodations, are there other strategies you employ to help LEP students achieve equity with their non-LEP peers on the GQE? Explain.

10. Have you ever "invented" a testing accommodation (other than one that has been mentioned in the ISTEP+ testing manual) that contributed to student success on a classroom exam? Explain.
    - Would you recommend this accommodation to state educators and policymakers for student use? Explain.

Questions about the State's Purpose for Testing Accommodations
(To understand teachers' perspectives on accommodations as a tool to create parity)

I am going to ask you a few questions about the purpose of testing accommodations according to the Indiana State Department of Education. Here is a quote from page 58 of the 2006-2007 ISTEP+ Program Manual (hand teachers a copy of the quote so they can read along):

The purpose of testing accommodations is to "level the playing field" or to achieve parity with non-disabled, non-language deficient peers in the test-taking situation.

1. Let us start with a yes / no question: Do these state-approved testing accommodations contribute to "leveling the playing field" for LEP students?

2. If so, do they contribute a small, moderate, or large amount? Explain.

3. Are testing accommodations, alone, capable of "leveling the playing field"?
    - On what do you base your answer?

4. If testing accommodations, alone, are incapable of "leveling the playing field," what revisions would you make to the present list to help LEP students achieve parity?

Questions about Teachers' Views on "Fairness"
(To learn teachers' perspectives on the impartiality of the testing process)

1. Can a "level playing field" exist for LEP students taking the GQE? Explain.

2. Do you identify bias in the IDOE's expectation that LEP students achieve on par with general education students on the GQE? Explain.

3. If so, what recommendations would you give state educators and policymakers about minimizing bias for LEP students taking the GQE?

4. What recommendations would you give state educators and policymakers regarding testing accommodations on the GQE?

5. Do you have any final thoughts?

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