

CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

In the State of North Carolina, three tests are currently mandated by the State Board of Education to assess students. Reading, math, and writing assessments are given to determine if students achieved the objectives from the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, the state curriculum covered throughout the school year. The reading and math assessments are given in grades three through eight. The writing assessment is required in grades four, seven, and ten in all school systems in North Carolina. The reading and math assessments for grades three through eight are given at the end of the school year in May. The writing assessment for grades three through eight and grade ten is given in March (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2005).

In the reading assessment, students are given passages to read with questions to answer at the end. These passages may include short stories, recipes, or poems. Students must read the passages to themselves. The students are given bubble sheets that correspond to the questions, and the students fill in the circles to match the correct answers (A, B, C, D). The following are examples of questions:

1. All of the following characteristics of poetry are found in “My Best Friend” *except* which one?
 - a. rhyme
 - b. comparison
 - c. stanzas
 - d. repetition
2. Which word *best* describes the author’s attitude toward this experience?
 - a. fascinated
 - b. scared
 - c. bored
 - d. happy

The math assessment has two parts. The calculator active section allows students to use a calculator to answer word problems. Students must show that they are capable of doing computations on their own. Therefore, the calculator inactive section prohibits the

use of a calculator. The math assessment is also answered on a bubble sheet. Both the reading and the math assessments are contributing factors in determining if a student is promoted to the next grade level.

The state mandate on the writing assessment is a little different than reading and math. Students in grades three through eight take the assessment as well as students in grade ten, but the state only scores and uses results from grades four, seven, and ten to determine if students are proficient in those areas. The county scores the tests for the other grades. For the writing test, the students are read a prompt one time then respond with a narrative addressing the prompt. An example of the prompt is as follows: Imagine you were walking outside and you saw a huge tree. When you got closer, you noticed that there was a small door in the side of the tree. You opened the door. Write a story about what happened the time you saw a huge tree and opened the door (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2005).

Students receive a score for content and a score for conventions (capitalization, spelling, punctuation and grammar). The scores range from zero-four. A score of three represents proficiency, and a score of four represents mastery. The writing assessment is a tool for determining students' proficiency in this area. The scores from this assessment do not determine promotion or retention. The End-of-Grade scores in math and reading are used in conjunction with local standards on classroom performance to determine if a student is promoted to the next grade.

Of these three tested areas, writing has produced the lowest student proficiency scores consistently across the state and is noted in Table 1, located on page 3. In Onslow

Table 1. North Carolina Testing Program Annual Writing Assessment, 1997-98 to 2003-04, Distribution of Low Performance Scores Across Years, Grade 4.

Grade 4	Number Tested	Level I Tested / %	Level II Tested / %	Level III Tested / %	Level IV Tested / %
1997-98	94,386	3,307 3.5%	42,243 44.8%	44,979 47.7%	3,857 4.1%
1998-99	96,649	1,933 2.0%	41,388 42.8%	48,020 49.7%	5,338 5.5%
1999-2000	99,038	1,783 1.8%	40,175 40.6%	52,390 52.9%	4,690 4.7%
2000-2001	100,930	2,309 2.3%	29,200 28.9%	64,555 64.0%	4,860 4.8%
2001-2002	101,554	2,155 2.1%	51,827 51.0%	44,530 43.8%	3,039 3.0%
2002-2003	99,382	11,210 11.3%	49,846 50.2%	35,507 35.7%	2,819 2.8%
2003-2004	102,121	9,841 9.6%	52,765 51.7%	37,732 36.9%	1,783 1.7%

Table 2. North Carolina Writing Assessment Proficiency, Onslow County Elementary Schools, Grade 4, 2003-2004.

School	March 2003 Percent Proficient	March 2004 Percent Proficient
Bell Fork Elementary	53.6%	60.3%
Blue Creek Elementary	35.6%	38.8%
Clyde Erwin Elementary	16.7%	21.6%
Dixon Elementary	28.6%	35.6%
Hunters Creek Elementary	33.6%	30.8%
Jacksonville Commons Ele.	45.2%	50.0%
Morton Elementary	33.8%	25.4%
Northwoods Elementary	32.9%	45.5%
Parkwood Elementary	48.6%	43.0%
Queens Creek Elementary	39.5%	40.2%
Richlands Elementary	37.8%	36.6%
Sand Ridge Elementary	38.4%	38.6%
Silverdale Elementary	35.1%	46.3%
Southwest Elementary	33.0%	41.4%
Summersill Elementary	38.2%	38.0%
Swansboro Elementary	36.7%	46.8%
Thompson Elementary	40.0%	30.8%
Onslow Grade 4	34.8%	39.8%

County, the level of proficiency during the 2003-2004 school year on the writing test in fourth grade is 39.8% (see Table 2, page 4), (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2005). Through observations from the last ten years, I noticed that students' writing proficiency is very poor. Colleagues observed poor writing skills as well. Some typical comments I have heard from teachers are:

- Students' sentences lack detail. They do not give a clear picture of what the writers are trying to convey.
- The students did not have adequate instruction in grammar from previous grades. The sentences lack proper subject/verb agreement.
- Teaching the grade curriculum and bringing a student up to grade level who is currently two or three years behind is impossible.

In addition, teachers express concern that students lack foundational skills, producing cumulative deficits in middle and high school. Table 3, page 6, does show an increase in students' writing proficiency according to writing scores from 2003 to 2004. However, the percentages are still at a drastically low proficiency level. Some examples of the skills that students lack are subject/verb agreement, correct punctuation, and staying on topic within a paragraph.

There are two kinds of writing assessments: formal and informal. The formal assessment is the North Carolina State Writing Test. All students are expected to perform on grade level on state testing, even though they have low proficiency levels.

Classroom writing samples show that students lack the mechanics to produce proficient paragraphs or coherent narratives containing clear topic sentences and

Table 3. North Carolina Testing Program Annual Writing Assessment Proficiency in Onslow County, Grades 7 and 10 for Years 2003 and 2004.

School	% proficient 2003	% proficient 2004
Dixon Middle	34	52.2
Hunters Creek Middle	45.9	56.9
Jacksonville Commons Middle	28	43.2
New Bridge Middle	63.7	64.3
Northwoods Park Middle	25.5	46
Southwest Middle	40.1	41.3
Swansboro Middle	32.4	46.7
Trexler Middle	25.1	41.4
Dixon High	34.9	58.4
Jacksonville High	41.3	61.1
Northside High	40.6	63.1
Richlands High	37.3	54.5
Southwest High	36.9	54.1
Swansboro High	36.9	61.3
White Oak High	36.4	56.5
Onslow County Grade 7	43.8	48.9
Onslow County Grade 10	33.9	58.4
State Grade 7	40.9	45.6
State Grade 10	39.9	52.5

supporting details. Informal assessments are routine samples that the students produce during the year. Teachers take this informal assessment data to the School Assistance Team for students who need special interventions. The steps for involving the School Assistance Team are as follows:

- The teacher sets an appointment with the Assistance Team to discuss strategies that can be implemented in the classroom. The teacher completes student data forms, including conference data, work samples, and grades prior to the appointment. A parent questionnaire is also included and is sent home.
- At the Assistance Team meeting, strategies are discussed and implemented for a minimum of three weeks. The team then reconvenes to discuss progress. If the team feels more time is needed, the strategies can be continued for a designated amount of time. If the strategies solved the problem, the process can be stopped. If the team determines that there is still a sufficient deficiency, it can refer the student for Special Needs testing.

Even though classroom documentation provides evidence that a problem exists and despite efforts to improve students' performance through assessment, the tests often do not reflect a large enough discrepancy (which is still a determining factor in some counties) in order for a student to qualify for services under the Specific Learning Disabilities classification. Student achievement deficits can have four sources:

1. The student received poor instruction.
2. Instruction is adequate but the student has a disability (example, a short attention-span, or central processing problem).
3. There is a combination of the two above.

4. The student has little background knowledge. The student has not been exposed to the material.

A learning disability is described as a “disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or written language, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or to do mathematical calculations” (Boon, 2001, p. 1). The federal definition further states that learning disabilities include “such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Learning disabilities do not include visual, hearing, or motor disabilities; mental retardation; or environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage” (Bar-Lev, 2005, p. 1). In Onslow County, eligibility for placement in the Specific Learning Disabilities Category is most often based on comparing standard scores from an educational evaluation to the full scale score on a psychological evaluation. The educational evaluation most often used is the WJR-III. The psychological test is almost always the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC III). In the past, a fifteen-point discrepancy between the two scores, with the psychological full scale IQ scores being the highest, suggests a learning disability. Under the latest reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the fifteen-point discrepancy will no longer be a sole determining factor. In Onslow County, however, the fifteen-point discrepancy is still being used to determine eligibility. If the student’s scores on these two tests show at least a fifteen-point discrepancy, then the student is eligible to receive special needs support services for the discrepancy in the designated academic areas. Most referral testing for Specific Learning

Disabilities is done with students who are in the elementary grades (Brown, Giandenoto & Bolen, 2002).

The WISC-III is administered by a psychologist, and several subtests are administered. These data are presented as a report to the school. Information presented include: a background of the student, the testing conditions, and the demeanor of the child. The subtests are summarized and the Verbal IQ, the Performance IQ, and the Full Scale IQ are given. When the WJR-III is administered, the evaluator follows a protocol. A protocol is defined as a booklet that is used to collect the test data from a scripted assessment. The protocol is divided into sections according to the testing manual. Blanks are provided for student responses so the data can be compared to the scoring manual.

Some of the students who are not qualifying for Specific Learning Disabilities are being promoted and fall further behind grade level. The implications are far reaching. Not only does being below grade level affect their immediate performance, but it creates a barrier as they advance into secondary education.

As students move into high school, students are assessed more in essay form. Open-ended questions replace multiple-choice (Hasbrouck, Tindal & Parker, 1994). In this county, students who lack the mechanics of good writing and the proper sequence of paragraphs often see a decline in their grades.

The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is still the primary entrance examination for admission to college in North Carolina. For years it has been a multiple-choice test consisting of a verbal section (reading) and a math section. Since 2005, the SAT has a writing component. Seventy percent of this section is composed of multiple-choice

grammatical questions. The official Prep Booklet provides this example (possible errors are underlined): “The students (a) have discovered that (b) they can address issues more effectively (c) through letter-writing campaigns (d) and not through public demonstrations. (e) no error occurs (Franek, 2005, p. 2). The students have to determine at which point the error occurs. The other 30% is a persuasive essay that is to be completed within twenty-five minutes (Franek, 2005). With such an emphasis on grammar on the written section of the SAT, teachers are concerned that students lack basic skills . Also, the time constraint on the essay prohibits adequate planning for a quality response (Franek, 2005). The revised SAT could prevent many students from admission to college. Ultimately, poor writing skills could limit future options.

During the course of my teaching career, I have been directly involved with the testing and placement of students in the Exceptional Needs Program. The testing results have produced ranges of scores that have determined students’ classifications which included Learning Disabled, Educable Mentally Disabled, Trainable Mentally Disabled, etc. These classifications give a general ability level but do not pinpoint the exact nature of the disability. Identifying the specific disability would be beneficial in developing strategies that would speed up the remediation process. Because of my observations, this thesis is based on the following hypotheses about the assessment used:

1. The evaluators may not be accurately administering and interpreting the WJR-III. Scoring of protocols by multiple evaluators may produce different outcomes which will affect possible placement.
2. The amount of training received on how to administer and interpret the WJR-III is not adequate in order to conduct a valid testing situation. The amount of

training time is inconsistent, and therefore, could affect the ability to conduct a valid test.

3. The comfort level of administering the WJR-III has a correlation to the amount of training received on how to administer and interpret the test.

Chapter II reviews the literature that supports the WJR-III and WISC III as valid assessment instruments. It also provides background information about the formation and reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to give the reader a better understanding of Special Education. This chapter also provides information about writing deficiencies and how they impact student performance.

Chapter III discusses the methodology used to collect the data from the two schools. It reviews protocols that were used to assess students. It will also describe the survey that was conducted with the Special Needs Department in the county.

Chapter IV analyzes all data and presents the findings. Data compares evaluators' testing interpretation at each school. Also, a summary of the data from the survey conducted is presented and the findings of the effects on test examiners discussed.

Chapter V summarizes the findings of the study. This chapter also provides recommendations to the Special Needs Department on how to better serve the population. It also provides ideas for further research and study.