High-stakes testing and the work of English teachers: an in-depth interview study of Massachusetts English teachers' experiences with the MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System).

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HIGH-STAKES TESTING AND THE WORK OF ENGLISH TEACHERS: AN IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW STUDY OF MASSACHUSETTS ENGLISH TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES WITH THE MCAS (MASSACHUSETTS COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT SYSTEM)

A Dissertation Presented

by

CARA LIVINGSTONE TURNER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May 2001

School of Education
DEDICATION

To Mike, my loving and supportive husband
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my participants, who welcomed me into their classrooms and homes, generously gave of their time, and shared their personal and professional experiences with me. Without their openness and honesty, I would not have completed this research. I am grateful for their faith in me, and I am hopeful this dissertation reflects the intricacies and richness of their experiences.

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ABSTRACT

HIGH-STAKES TESTING AND THE WORK OF ENGLISH TEACHERS: AN IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW STUDY OF MASSACHUSETTS ENGLISH TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES WITH THE MCAS (MASSACHUSETTS COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT SYSTEM)

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Over the past decade, politicians, businesspersons, and educators have pushed for "higher," "tougher," and "world-class" standards for K-12 students. This standards movement includes state standardized, curriculum-based tests. Massachusetts recently developed the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). MCAS is considered a high-stakes test because a passing score determines graduation for students, and sanctions and rewards for teachers and schools.

The experiences of 16 Massachusetts English teachers in teaching under the MCAS high-stakes testing requirement were explored using a qualitative research method known as in-depth interviewing from a phenomenological perspective (Seidman, 1998). These participants taught a variety of students in a range of Massachusetts public schools. Over the course of three 90-minute interviews, each participant established context through life histories, detailed their current teaching experiences, and made meaning of these experiences. Using an inductive process of analysis, data were reduced and coded; essential features, relationships, and patterns were explored. The findings were organized into three major themes.
This study found that teachers narrowed their curriculum, changed instruction, and designed classroom assessments to match the content and skills that MCAS tests. Teachers associated both gains and losses with these changes. Moreover, this high-stakes test both enhanced and undermined their professional identities. MCAS and related professional activities empowered teachers; MCAS also disempowered teachers by imposing policies that controlled curriculum and instruction, threatened sanctions, and damaged reputations. Teachers voiced their socio-political analysis of the theories that underpin this high-stakes testing movement, the motives behind MCAS, and the current state of education.

The findings reveal that the line between educational reform and improved education is neither unidirectional nor linear. Rather, it is a complex web of influences, motives, and actions. How policy winds its way into practice depends on the varied contexts in which teachers perceive and experience reform. This study suggests implications for policymakers, politicians, teachers, teacher educators, and researchers. Among other things, it makes a plea to policymakers and legislators to define what they mean by standards, re-examine the narrow content of the test, and include teachers as legitimate participants in making policy decisions that affect them and their students.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

Ever since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education [NCEE], 1983), legislators, policymakers, businesspersons, and taxpayers have debated the need for “higher,” “tougher,” and “world-class” standards for K-12 students in the United States (Jennings, 1998). The word “standards” means different things to different people (Noddings, 1997; Raths, 1997; Ravitch, 1995). Yet, all definitions are related to what should be learned (goal, norm, criteria) and to how well or how much should be learned (quality, measure, amount). Implicit in the discussion of standards is the notion of “standardization” (at least within states), where one curriculum and system of evaluation fits all students.

Ravitch (1995) offers a concise definition of what people mean when they talk about standards for the K-12 educational system. She defines standards as having three common uses:

1. Content or curricular standards: what teachers should teach and what students should learn;
2. Performance standards: measurements to determine how good is good enough in terms of what teachers should teach and what students should learn; and
3. Opportunity to learn or school delivery standards: the availability of programs, resources, and personnel to allow all students an equal opportunity to learn.

Over the past decade, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has implemented standards-based education reform by developing content standards in the form of curriculum frameworks. In order to ensure content standards are being taken seriously, Massachusetts officials have developed a series of standardized tests known as the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) to assess students’
performance on content standards. MCAS is considered a “high stakes” test (Haney & Madaus, 1986) because a passing score determines promotion or graduation for students and allocation of resources or sanctions for teachers and school systems.

My interest in this high-stakes testing requirement centers on the work of English teachers. These teachers play a pivotal role in helping prepare students to take all MCAS subject matter tests because these tests require students to complete a substantial amount of reading and writing in every subject. I believe it is essential to study the work of teachers who are charged with implementing educational reform policies—such as a high-stakes testing requirement—in order to understand in what ways they are carrying out, are affected by, and make sense of these policies.

The purpose of this dissertation study, therefore, was to explore how this high-stakes testing is affecting the work of Massachusetts high school English teachers. Using in-depth interviews from a phenomenological perspective (Seidman, 1998), I explored how ninth and tenth grade English teachers experienced their work in light of the MCAS requirement and its subsequent accountability measures.

In Chapter One, I present an informed discussion of the national standards movement and how this movement has played out in Massachusetts. This discussion sets the stage for my study on English teachers and MCAS tests. In Chapter Two, I review research on how high-stakes testing of students affects K-12 teachers. In Chapter Three, I present an explanation of and rationale for my methods of data collection and analysis and the theories that underpin them. Chapters Four, Five, and Six are devoted to my findings, which are organized around three central themes. Finally, in Chapter Seven, I present a discussion of my findings, implications, and conclusions.
The National Standards Movement

English teachers in Massachusetts do not work in a vacuum. Rather, they work within educational organizations that are governed by state policies, which, in turn, are influenced by national legislation and executive orders. These educational policies are often developed because of social, economic, and political forces. Over the past 30 years, these forces have converged to start a movement known as the national standards movement. In Figure 1, I present a graphic overview of what I believe are the forces that have contributed to the national standards movement.

Social Forces

During the 1960s and 1970s, the United States experienced what Ravitch (1983) calls the “revival of ethnocentrism” (p. 270). It was the era of the Civil Rights Movement, “black power,” celebrating of ethnic heritage, and the realization of the failure of the idyllic melting pot theory (Leinwand, 1992; Ravitch, 1983). In the 1950s, large numbers of immigrants from the Caribbean, Central and South America, and Canada began to arrive to the United States (Leinwand, 1992). Many ethnic groups struggled as schools tried to force them to give up their home languages and cultures. These groups vocalized the need to educate their children in their native languages so that academically they would not fall behind their English-speaking peers. Furthermore, the Civil Rights Movement was successful in calling attention to the inequalities of education, and it opened the door for disenfranchised groups to demand, legislatively and judicially, quality education for their children.

---

Figure 1. Forces Contributing to the National Standards Movement

**SOCIAL FORCES**

**National Context (1960s & 1970s)**
- Revival of ethnocentrism
- Civil Rights Movement
- Influx of Caribbean, Central & South American, & Canadian immigrants
- Rights for disabled

**Antithesis (1980s)**
- English-Only Movement
- Cultural literacy
- Core knowledge
- Back-to-basics education
- Eliminate bilingual education

**ECONOMIC FORCES**

**National Economic Decline (1970s)**
- High inflation
- Priority for world economic competitiveness

**Linking Economy & Education (1980s)**
- A Nation at Risk (1983)
  - Poor math & science international test scores
  - General educational mediocrity
  - Educational disarmament
  - Weakening of economy & international competitiveness

**Linking Businesses & Education (1980s)**
- Ill-prepared workers needing on-the-job remediation
- Competitive model applied to education
- School choice
- Vouchers
- Merit pay
- Accountability

**POLITICAL FORCES**

- **Reagan Administration**
  - A Nation at Risk (1983)
- **Bush Administration**
  - AMERICA 2000
- **Clinton Administration**
  - GOALS 2000
  - Revamped ESEA

Content standards
Performance standards
Opportunity-to-learn standards
One of the most controversial educational initiatives that has come out of this social movement has been bilingual education. Opponents view it as follows: A means of fostering minority separation; a violation of the national language (which does not exist officially); a reflection on minorities' unwillingness to learn to speak English; and even an educational program that interferes with students' thinking abilities (Cardenas, 1984). On the other hand, proponents see bilingual education as a way of legitimizing native languages, promoting self-esteem, strengthening students' thinking abilities, and improving students' chances for academic success (McGroarty, 1992). Many of these reforms caused waves of fear among white middle class parents. According to Tyack and Cuban (1995), these parents feared that large number of minorities completing high school and attending college would diminish the advantage that middle class whites enjoyed.

In the 1980s, a strong counter-movement developed against ethnic pride and the general trend favoring pluralism. This counter-movement called for the revival of conventional demands for the socialization of immigrants (Cremin, 1990) as is evidenced by English-Only legislation that passed in states like California and Florida. Many believed that the best place to begin this renewal should be the public school system. Consequently, there was a push to emphasize courses such as civics and American history, and a call to end bilingual/bicultural programs (Cremin, 1990). Afraid of losing our common culture, conservative education specialists, such as Chester Finn (1991), E. D. Hirsch (1987; 1996), and others\(^2\), published books proclaiming the need for core

knowledge and back-to-basics education. These same people, among others, demanded establishing high standards for education, and not weakening these standards by catering so directly to special interests, which they saw as threatening a sense of coherence in society.

Economic Forces

The link between education and the economy. The 1970s was a decade of high inflation and high unemployment. When Ronald Reagan became President, one of his agendas was to respond to foreign competition in an effort to boost the economy. President Reagan’s educational agenda was directly connected to his economic agenda. He believed that to make America economically competitive, we needed to raise educational standards to groom the best and the brightest students for the scientific and industrial job market (Berube, 1991).

President Reagan’s Secretary of Education, Terrell Bell, created the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE), and he directed this commission to investigate the quality of education in America. After an eighteen-month study, the NCEE published their report and titled it *A Nation at Risk* (NCEE, 1983). The Commission’s language is powerful and reflects the President’s interest in education for economic competitiveness:

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science and technological innovation is being taken over by competitors throughout the world....The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen ourselves. We have even squandered the gains
in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge. . . . We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament. (p. 5)

This document had profound effects on the public’s view of education for several reasons. First, it was widely distributed. Second, the document enjoyed unanimous bipartisan approval, so much so that the issue of educational standards became a “steady-eddy” platform during subsequent political campaigns. Third, A Nation at Risk appeared to the general public to be legitimate research disseminated by a prestigious group of educators. Yet, Edward D. Fiske (1988), education editor for the New York Times, said that A Nation at Risk was “full of apocalyptic rhetoric and military analogies,” and it was “more legal brief than scholarly analysis” (p. B 10). Finally, the NCEE’s “indicators of risk” included “deliberately alarmist” (Berube, 1991, p. 95) statements about poor achievement on international tests, a drop in math and science standardized test scores, and declines in SAT results, something Berliner and Biddle (1995) say is nothing more than a “Manufactured Crisis” (p. 4). According to Fiske, A Nation at Risk “pointedly ignored data that standardized test scores had been on the rise for a number of years” (p. B 10). Despite its criticisms, A Nation at Risk (NCEE, 1983) was the spark that ignited a conflagration about how education and the economy are linked, and this raging fire has lasted over 18 years.

The involvement of the business industry. Corporate America responded quickly and aggressively to A Nation at Risk (NCEE, 1983), echoing some of the claims in this report, namely about how ill-prepared graduates were for the work of the business world and how businesses had continued to assume the cost of teaching their workers fundamental skills (DiConti, 1996). Thus, by the 1980s corporations began forging links
with schools to improve students' employability. Moreover, state and federal politicians called on business leaders for their input on how to improve public education, going so far as to co-sponsor several national education summits with businesses (Bierlein, 1993; DiConti, 1996). The involvement of business in education is based on a competitive model to improve both the process and the product of public schools (Bierlein, 1993). Businesspersons believe that fostering competition among schools and teachers will drive educational improvements (National Educational Summit, 1999; Ohanian, 1999).

Yet, the educational community has questioned the motives of these business leaders. Some critics (Berliner, 1993, 1996; Ohanian, 1999) question why business leaders bash public schools when, according to economic research, the United States is number one in terms of worker productivity and has been so for a number of years. Others state that large corporations have benefited significantly from using their ability to bargain for lower or no taxes (that could be used for education) in exchange for locating their businesses in particular locations. Berliner and Biddle (1995) cite research showing that this country did not have a shortage of scientists, engineers, and mathematicians. Not only were these scientists, engineers, and mathematicians seeking to enter various professions in droves, but also many were having difficulty finding work. Finally, Cremin (1990) states that the blame for the lack of economic competitiveness is misplaced; instead, blame should go to decisions that the President, Congress, the Federal Reserve Board, and the federal departments of Treasury, Commerce, and Labor make regarding the economy.
With the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (NCEE, 1983), the federal government moved to have more influence on state educational policies. President Reagan’s second Secretary of Education, William Bennett, condemned bilingual education programs, advocated core courses in humanities, denounced non-canonical, multicultural literature, and pushed for prayer in public schools, funds for parochial education, and moral literacy (Berube, 1991). Moreover, Bennett, among others (for example, Hirsch, 1996; Ravitch, 1995), proclaimed that Japanese education was superior to U.S. education because the Japanese possessed superior cultural values and a shared inherited culture and knowledge.

Many have criticized Bennett and others for this type of international comparative research (Berliner, 1993; Berliner & Biddle, 1995; DiConti, 1996). According to researchers, evidence from international comparative studies is weak for several reasons: sampling biases; inconsistent research methods and sampling methods; differences between U.S. and other countries’ curricula; a lack of focus on the unique values and strengths of U.S. education; and the deliberate attempt of the press and critics to ignore comparative studies in which the U.S. has excelled (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; DiConti, 1996). Despite these counter-claims, politicians have forged ahead with their agenda to promote higher standards for education.

**President George H.W. Bush’s AMERICA 2000.** President George H.W. Bush convened the first National Education Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia as a bipartisan, collaborative effort. Both liberal and conservative state and national leaders believed that some significant educational reform was necessary. They stated that our nation’s
educational system was too confusing, and too many vested parties (test vendors, textbook companies, training programs) were making contradictory decisions regarding what should be taught and how this information should be taught (Jennings, 1998). The leaders also believed that previous educational reform efforts had been too slow and/or ineffective in yielding any significant change.

In April 1991, President George H.W. Bush announced his plan known as AMERICA 2000, which called for, among other things, tougher standards in five core courses, voluntary national exams, report cards of performance of all schools, and school choice (Jennings, 1998). He appointed a bipartisan council of governors, administration officials, members of Congress, and educators to advise him on the development and implementation of standards and testing. This council, known as the National Council on Education Standards and Testing (NCEST), stated that national standards must reflect high expectations (not minimal competency), provide focus and direction (not a national curriculum), and be national, voluntary, and dynamic. Moreover, assessments should be multiple, voluntary, and developmental (Ravitch, 1995).

What NCEST and the George H. W. Bush administration envisioned was that states, districts, publishers, and professional organizations would work together to develop new assessment systems based on common standards, and that the results of these tests would be used for comparisons and high-stakes consequences such as promotion, graduation, college admission, and certification for employment (Jennings, 1998; Ravitch, 1995). NCEST also stressed that reform should include new roles, responsibilities, and professional development for teachers; new technology; assistance
for students, families and communities in need; and action to reduce health and social barriers to learning (Ravitch, 1995).

As expected, many voiced criticisms of President Bush’s plan. Some Republicans feared this new national role in education. Although some Democrats viewed the federal involvement in education as a guarantee of equity (Ravitch, 1995), other Democrats said that not enough money was provided for education reform; that national tests would amount to “blaming the victim” since scores would fall under socio-economic lines; and, that school choice and vouchers for private schools would lead to the demise of public education (Jennings, 1998). In addition, non-legislative groups—the National Governors’ Association (NGA), the National Education Association (NEA), American Federation of Teachers (AFT), civil rights groups, business groups, and educational researchers—were divided on issues of national standards and tests (Ravitch, 1995).

What ultimately killed the AMERICA 2000 bill were not debates on content standards and tests, but the inflammatory debate about opportunity-to-learn standards. On the whole, Democrats complained that it was unjust to establish and implement high standards and high-stakes measurements since not every child was given the same opportunity to learn in terms of resources and quality of teachers (Jennings, 1998).

President Clinton’s GOALS 2000: Educate America Act. Most of these same heated debates persisted in the change of administration, primarily because President Clinton’s GOALS 2000 was virtually identical to President George H.W. Bush’s AMERICA 2000. When Clinton sent the GOALS 2000 bill to Congress, it contained the following key issues:

- Six out of the seven national goals standards for education that President George H. W. Bush and the governors agreed on in 1990;
A call for the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) to monitor the implementation of goals, and approve national content, performance and opportunity-to-learn standards;

$400 million for grants to states to develop content and opportunity-to-learn standards;

National job skills standards to be developed by a council of business, labor, and education leaders. (Jennings, 1998)

By and large, the national education organizations and business leaders supported this legislation, but the state governors reserved their support because the opportunity-to-learn standards would require states to spend more money to implement these reform efforts (Jennings, 1998). Ultimately, the opportunity-to-learn standards were so weakened that they amounted to nothing more than a recommendation. In order to receive any federal money, states had to have content and performance assessment standards, but did not have to guarantee students an opportunity to meet these standards.

On March 30, 1994, President Clinton signed GOAL 2000 into law. Central to the bill were eight national goals for education—six that President Bush advocated plus two more, one dealing with teacher professional development, and one dealing with parental involvement (Jennings, 1998; Ravitch, 1995; Smith, 1995). GOALS 2000 was groundbreaking legislation. It signaled the first time the national government had interceded in the educational system in an attempt to upgrade the quality of education for all students, not just low-achieving or special needs students (Smith, 1995).

Revamping ESEA: Tying federal funds to standards. Once the Secretary of Education Richard Riley and President Clinton succeeded in passing their education reform plan through Congress, they began working on legislation designed to revamp the Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The original intent of this act grew out of concern about educational inequities for children with special needs, and it was an
attempt to narrow the achievement gap. President Clinton and Secretary Riley were interested in refashioning the ESEA in a way that broadened its original purpose (Jennings, 1998; Smith, 1995). The most significant aspect of this legislation was that states were required to develop their own educational standards in math and reading in order to receive Title I funds (Jennings, 1998; Smith, 1995). Under GOALS 2000, developing these standards was optional, but if states wanted the additional Title I funds, they had to agree to develop standards.

Current federal legislation and proposed legislation. The year 2000 prompted legislators and educators to review the nation’s progress towards meeting the eight goals established by GOALS 2000. Many stated American schools had failed to reach any of the broad goals the nation’s governors outlined over 10 years ago at the first national education summit (Hoff, 1999; Wilgoren, 1999). Nonetheless, leaders in the NEGP believed that these goals should be credited with driving educational reform efforts, and they urged Congress to renew the NEGP’s charge of monitoring the nation’s progress towards meeting these goals (Hoff, 1999; Wilgoren, 1999). In addition, on October 21, 1999, the House voted to extend the ESEA Title I funding to $9.9 billion from $7.7 billion. This bill required schools to compile and report information about the performance of their students, schools, and teacher qualification. It also had a provision for parents of children in failing schools to transfer their children to other public schools in the same district. At the same time, U.S. Senator Paul Wellstone, D-Minn., sponsored the “Fairness and Accuracy in Student Testing Act,” which called for a moratorium on using high-stakes tests as the sole measure for critical decisions on students’ futures (Hoff, 2000; National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2000a).
President George W. Bush’s educational agenda shows that the furor over testing and accountability remains constant at the federal level. Among his proposals, President George W. Bush calls for annual state reading and mathematics tests for students in grades 3 through 8. His idea is to tie performance on these tests to Title I funding. He wants to initiate a system of rewards and sanctions by reducing federal funding to states and schools that fail to meet performance objectives, and awarding extra money to those that close what he calls an achievement gap (Education Week, 2001; Olson, 2001a).

Backlash against standards-based state policies. Even though the standards movement is still thriving at the national level, a backlash is occurring at the state level over the implementation of tough academic standards and high-stakes tests. Consequently, policymakers have softened or are considering softening their policies (Olson, 2001c; Steinberg, 1999). Many states, such as Alaska, Alabama, Arizona, Maryland, Virginia, and Wisconsin, have reconsidered their high-stakes sanctions because students are not achieving high scores on state tests, and many are at risk of dropping out or being held back (Bushweller, 2001; Olson, 2001c). In Louisiana, parents have even filed a civil rights complaint with the U.S. Department of Education, stating that the state’s high-stakes test has a disproportionately negative impact on poor and minority children (Robelen, 2000). Throughout the nation, parents, teachers, and students are loudly criticizing the new content and performance standards and policies for several reasons: they were too quickly implemented; there has not been enough financial support for proper implementation; teachers and administrators do not understand what is expected of them; the tests often do not represent what students should learn; and high standards are often confused with minimum-competency standards (Steinberg, 1999).
The Educational Community’s Response

What has been the response of the education community to standards-based reform? Many have been quite vocal about the lack of solid research on which proponents of the standards movement have based their decisions for reform (for example, Ohanian, 1999; Noddings, 1997; Stewart, 1995). For example, Berliner (1993) and Berliner and Biddle (1995) deconstruct proponents’ use of standardized tests, I.Q. tests, and SAT scores to show not only a steady increase in test scores in general over the last 20 to 25 years, but also a significant increase in minority test scores in particular. According to Berliner and Biddle (1995), these test scores are really quite impressive considering the vast increase in participation of students who were once marginalized from higher education. The educational community, likewise, has had a great deal to say about the three facets of the standards movement: content standards, assessment and accountability measures, and opportunity-to-learn standards.

Response to content standards. With the exception of Iowa, all states in this country have developed, or are in the process of developing, rigorous content standards for students (Ramirez, 1999). Educators criticize the fundamental philosophy on which content standard-setting is based. They state that listing what teachers should teach and what students should learn is too simplistic a remedy for educational reform and cuts short what should be a rich and complex educational debate (Lockwood, 1998; Noddings, 1997; Reigeluth 1997). According to critics, someone always pays a price when standards are raised or changed, and it is the economically poor or the non-college-bound students who will suffer the most because these standards assume that students have had
certain previous educational experiences and the desire to attend college (Lockwood, 1998; Noddings, 1997).

Some educators state that the current use of content standards only promotes minimum-competency standardization, and that this will lead to the specification of pathetically low skills, particularly for students already tracked into non-college-bound courses (Noddings, 1997; Reigeluth, 1997). This standardization will have dire consequences for teachers and students, the least of which is frustration, anxiety, lack of local control, and self-doubt (Covington, 1996; Reigeluth, 1997). More serious consequences include less time for the non-academic mission of schooling—the emotional and social development of children—and high dropout rates (Darling-Hammond & Falk, 1997; Reigeluth, 1997; Wolk, 1998). Many believe that implementing this notion of standardization ultimately will not be successful because there is no way to make standards uniformly challenging for students of differing abilities, home life, and prior knowledge (Reigeluth, 1997).

Response to assessment and accountability measures. As of 1998, one-third of 49 states required students to score at designated levels on tests for promotion or graduation, and half the states had decided to hold students accountable by applying sanctions such as withholding promotion or diplomas (Wolk, 1998). Proponents of high-stakes testing believe that assessments and the threat of sanctions, if certain scores are not achieved, will drive effective pedagogy, which, in turn, will lead to student success (Pipho, 1997; Stewart, 1995). Several critics of high-stakes testing have stated that accountability measurements are not new; many are simply revised initiatives from the 1970s (Pipho, 1997; Stewart, 1995; Stiggens, 1999). Yet, proponents of this testing have stated that
these new forms of assessment—criterion-referenced tests—are intended to be superior to norm-referenced tests because these new tests assess what students have learned. According to Stewart (1995), however, these criterion-referenced tests are no different from previous norm-referenced tests because what matters most with both types of tests is how the scores are reported and used rather than the fundamental nature of the exams.

Many opponents of mandatory testing believe that the connection between tests and student motivation is naïve, simplistic, and potentially damaging for teachers and students (McCaslin, 1996; Stiggens, 1999; Weinstein, 1996). Part of the problem is when teachers believe their sole responsibility is to produce high test scores rather than help students learn, they resort to controlling teaching techniques, thus giving students few choices for learning material (Covington, 1996; Reigeluth, 1997). Gone are thematic, interdisciplinary, and flexible teaching strategies (Reigeluth, 1997). According to opponents, tactics such as withholding promotion or graduation will not help motivate students to learn. Rather, they will leave students feeling anxious and inadequate because they fear they cannot measure up (McCaslin, 1996; Stiggens, 1999). Educators and researchers, thus, advocate students-centered instruction with quality in-class, student-centered assessments (Stiggens, 1999).

Darling-Hammond and Falk (1997) remind us that dozens of studies have shown that grade retention only contributes to academic failure and behavioral problems. Students who have been retained have poorer self-concepts, problems with social adjustment, more negative attitudes towards school, and a higher chance of dropping out of school. Darling-Hammond and Falk, therefore, believe that using assessments for grade retention and withholding diplomas will not work. Finally, according to Wolk
(1998), these measures are particularly dangerous for urban students, placing them in "double jeopardy" (p. 2).

A common feeling among educators is that one-shot standardized assessments are not enough to determine what students have learned; rather there should be in place a system of multiple assessments that evaluate a broad range of performances (Darling-Hammond & Falk, 1997; Pipho, 1997; Reigeluth, 1997). Darling-Hammond and Falk (1997) encourage the use of alternative assessments that (a) engage students in "real-world tasks rather than multiple-choice exercises" and (b) evaluate students "according to standards and criteria that are important for actual performance in a given field" (p. 196). These assessments could include, among other things, essay tests, oral presentations and debates, solutions to problems, and portfolios. Yet recently, testing experts are finding that these forms of assessments, particularly portfolio assessments, have reliability and validity problems (McDermott, 2001).

Many critics of high-stakes testing include national organizations, who are taking a professional stance regarding the use of these standardized tests. For example, the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), and the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) have developed guidelines, position statements, and test-takers' bills of rights for the use of high-stakes testing (American Educational Research Association [AERA], 2000; NCTE, 2000b; Olson, 2001b).

Response to opportunity-to-learn standards. Many educators fuse the issues of content and performance standards with issues of equity. Several have criticized proponents of national standards, such as Ravitch (1995) and Hirsch (1996), for creating
an illusion that the use of national standards will give every student a fair chance at an education (for example, Good, 1996; Natriello, 1996; Noddings, 1997; Taylor, 1996).

Educators criticize pro-standards reformers for emphasizing the connection between the economy and education but failing to discuss or recognize the economic conditions leading to a poor educational system (Ball & Goldman, 1997; Natriello, 1996; Stewart, 1995). Many cite economic research from the General Accounting Office (GAO), the Children’s Defense Fund, the National Commission on Testing and Public Policy, and other agencies to paint a national picture of economic poverty and social ills that teachers must face daily:

- One in every five school-age children lives in poverty (Taylor, 1996);
- The U.S. poverty rate is higher than many other industrialized countries: three times higher than West Germany and nine times higher than Finland (Taylor, 1996);
- The U.S. ranks eighteenth among other industrialized countries in the gap between the rich and the poor, and it ranks sixteenth in living standards of the poorest 20 percent of children (Taylor, 1996);
- Among eight industrialized countries, the U.S. has the highest rate of single parent families and one of the highest teen pregnancy rates (Taylor, 1996);
- The average cost to send a child to public school is $5,000, while it costs $22,000 a year to keep a person in prison (Ohanian, 1999);
- Even though President Clinton vowed that by the year 2000 all students should be mentally and physically ready to learn, he cut Food Stamps and abandoned welfare aid to those in need (Ohanian, 1999).

Educators believe that politicians conveniently ignore issues of poverty when making educational policy, and that lawmakers and businesspersons should be held accountable for these social ills, just as teachers are told they should be held accountable for high standards (Taylor, 1996).

According to educators, politicians have short-changed the American system of education, more so than many other industrialized countries:
• The U.S. ranked ninth among sixteen industrial nations in per-pupil expenditures for grades K-12 (Berliner, 1993);
• The U.S. GAO estimated in 1995 that we need $112 billion to repair or upgrade facilities and $11 billion just to comply with federal regulations (Natriello, 1996);
• The same GAO report estimated that 14 billion students were attending schools needing repair or replacement (Ohanian, 1999);
• Forty percent of U.S. schools lack science laboratory facilities and facilities for large group instruction (Natriello, 1996);
• Inner city schools with large minority enrollments had an even greater number of unsatisfactory conditions (Natriello, 1996).

Educators maintain that the same political leaders who criticize education have virtually abandoned schools through weakened aid to schools (Berliner, 1993; Stewart, 1995) and through feeble legislation for opportunity-to-learn standards (Jennings, 1998; Noddings, 1997). These educators question the motives of politicians and corporations when Clinton slashed the Healthy Start program funds (funds for young children) from $104.2 million to $93 million and simultaneously increased military spending from $1.9 billion to $264.3 billion, and exempted bankers from paying $12 billion for the savings and loan disaster (Good, 1996). Instead of fixing the schools' physical plants, the federal government offered competitive grants to states to raise standards (Ohanian, 1999). According to the National Commission on Testing and Public Policy, mandatory testing consumes $700 and $900 million in indirect and direct expenditures (Berliner & Biddle, 1995), and some state that corporations benefit from all this money (Noddings, 1997).

Many researchers also cite studies showing that money does matter when it comes to education. Berliner (1993) asserts that states that could afford to hire the more experienced and educated teachers had students who performed better on tests. Money spent for instructional purposes such as teacher salaries, reduction of class size, and professional development positively affect student performance. Additionally, Taylor
(1996) explains that poverty correlates with variation in students’ cognitive and academic outcomes.

How the National Standards Movement Has Played Out in Massachusetts

Education Reform Act

Starting in 1993 with the passing of the Education Reform Law, the national standards movement has had a significant influence on educational policy and practice in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. John Schneider, the former research director for the Massachusetts Joint Commission on Education, Arts, and Humanities, was responsible for organizing the legislative process that culminated in the passing of the 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Law. In an interview I conducted with him, Schneider directly connected the state and national standards-based reform movements:

I think there were a couple of things [that led to Education Reform in Massachusetts]. There was evidence both nationally, but also in Massachusetts, that the state schools were not performing...as well as they...should be. At the same time...the state had pretty much abandoned its responsibility to provide funds for schools....The business community had also organized to say, “Look, we’re concerned about the capability of the state workers in the future. We need [a] higher skill level.”...And, I think there was also some political ambition too....People had bought in that it was not simply going to be, “Let’s just put out money, lots of different programs, and see what happens.” It was “No, we’re going to provide additional money...and a program of assessment that will be very different from programs that we’ve had in the past.” (Schneider, Interview, August 13, 1999)

In keeping with the standards-based reform movement, the Commonwealth passed legislation to establish high academic content standards in the form of curriculum

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3 In order to develop the context for my study, I conducted one 60-to-90-minute interview with several people who participated in the development of the Education Reform Law and the MCAS tests: Jeff Nelhaus, Bruce Penniman, David Roach, John Schneider, and Anne Steele. I transcribed my tape-recorded interviews with each participant. When quoting these participants, I used their exact words, unless I needed to insert my own words for clarity. My own words are in brackets. In addition, I edited these selections to make the language flow smoothly and to remove any redundancies. If I removed any words, I note this with the use of an ellipse.
frameworks for a variety of subjects. What followed these curricular developments was the creation of a system of assessments intended to determine if students have learned what the various frameworks specify.

The Education Reform Law has mandated both types of standards, and has charged the Massachusetts Board of Education (BOE) with developing and implementing these standards. Massachusetts Commonwealth law states that the purpose of this assessment system is as follows:

- To evaluate and compare the performance of public schools and districts;
- To improve curriculum and instruction;
- To measure the extent to which schools and districts are helping students acquire the skills, competencies, and knowledge mandated in the Commonwealth’s standards and curriculum frameworks in the areas of mathematics, science and technology, history and social sciences, English, foreign languages, and the arts [my emphasis];
- To identify academic levels of achievement;
- To inform teachers, parents, administrators, and students about their academic performance (Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993)

Furthermore, the law outlines which students will participate in this assessment system as well as the criteria for these performance standards or assessments:

- All assessment instruments will be criterion-referenced, which will assess students’ ability to meet state academic standards established in curriculum frameworks.
- This system will employ a variety of assessment instruments—including work samples, projects, and portfolios—that are comprehensive or statistically valid.
- Students in grades 4, 8, and 10 shall participate in a comprehensive diagnostic assessment [my emphasis].
- The assessment instruments will avoid gender, cultural, ethnic, or racial stereotypes, but will recognize different learning styles and impediments to learning.
- The assessments will not discriminate against culturally and linguistically diverse students or students with special needs.
- All students in a transitional bilingual education program shall be permitted to participate in assessments in the language, which best allows them to demonstrate achievement and mastery, but no student
shall be allowed to be tested in a language other than English for longer than three consecutive years. (Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993)

Education Reform Law and MCAS

Many of the Education Reform Law mandates, particularly those that pertain to assessment, have come to fruition. The Commonwealth has developed a series of standardized tests known as the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). Students in grades 4, 8, and 10 take MCAS tests in four areas: English language arts, mathematics, science and technology, and history and social science (fourth graders are exempt from the history and social science test). These assessments are criterion-referenced, and test makers have attempted to make them bias-free. In addition, they have attempted to make accommodations for LEP (limited English proficient) and special needs students. The Commonwealth also uses scores for district, state and national comparisons, and for pushing teachers to improve curriculum and instruction.

On the other hand, other mandates have been ignored to date. Students in grades 4, 8 and 10 do participate in assessments, but these are not diagnostic assessments, particularly for tenth graders.\(^4\) Test-makers have only developed a test for LEP in Spanish. Finally, the Commonwealth has not developed a variety of assessment instruments such as the use of portfolios and projects. Instead, the only assessment comes in the form of standardized tests in four disciplines. According to testing experts, however, the constructed response items on the MCAS tests (that is, the long composition

\(^4\) In response to criticisms on the amount of time required for students to take all the subject matter MCAS tests, the Department of Education, as of 2001, has decided to spread out the test over different grade levels. This does not have a significant affect on high school students since they will continue to take the current four subject matter tests in the tenth grade.
and open response questions) qualifies MCAS as a performance assessment instrument; this qualification has led proponents of MCAS to conclude that MCAS is appropriate for its intended purpose (McDermott, 2001).

MCAS is a high-stakes test, which means three things: (a) the scores will be used to make comparisons among schools and districts; (b) the test is intended to drive curricular and instructional improvements; and (c) the scores will be used to hold these students, teachers, schools, and districts accountable for student performance. Jeff Nelhaus, Director of Assessments and Evaluation Services for the Massachusetts Department of Education, explains the rationale for this accountability as follows:

[MCAS] really had to drive improvements...It’s all well and good for states to develop standards, but to really drive their adoption, you really need a vehicle like this....Because of...the fact that students...are going to have to pass it to graduate from high school...[and that] schools would be evaluated, at least in part, on these test results, we knew that this was going to be an important test....[With] tests in the past...maybe they were used internally...to make some decisions about including students or whatever they wanted to do with it, but it didn’t have certain public scrutiny and exposure it has now. So knowing it would, we knew we had to develop a good test...that would promote good instruction [and] that would be based on strong academic [content] standards (Nelhaus, Interview, September 21, 1999)

The Commonwealth reports MCAS scores according to four performance levels: Advanced, Proficient, Needs Improvement, and Failing. Recently, the Massachusetts BOE established Needs Improvement as the Competency Determination level for high school graduation. Beginning with the class of 2003, students in grade 10 will have to pass the MCAS English Language Arts and the MCAS Mathematics tests with a minimum scaled score of 220 (a score set at the Needs Improvement threshold) in order to qualify for graduation (Massachusetts Board of Education [BOE], 2000a). The decision to set the passing threshold at the Needs Improvement level rather than
Proficient level centers on the newness (and continual revision) of the frameworks.

Because the first *Mathematics Curriculum Framework* was introduced in December 1995 and the *English Language Arts Framework* in January 1997, the Board reasoned that it would not be fair to require students in the class of 2003 to perform at the Proficient level as a condition for graduation (Massachusetts BOE, 1999). They believe that students and teachers need time for the curriculum frameworks to take effect.

Commissioner of Education David Driscoll stated that the BOE will phase in other MCAS subject matter tests after schools have had ample opportunity to implement their revised curriculum frameworks. Over time, the Commonwealth will raise the threshold and passing score as more students have had the benefit of learning under the curriculum frameworks. Thus, the stakes will be raised over time (Massachusetts BOE, 1999).

Yet, as the stakes are raised, so are students afforded more opportunities to re-take the MCAS tests. In January 2001, the Massachusetts BOE adopted an MCAS re-test plan that will allow high school students who fail the mathematics or English language arts MCAS tests to retake a pared-down, focused version of MCAS up to four times before they graduate from high school (Massachusetts BOE, 2001). Students, who have passed MCAS, but who wish to be eligible for the Certificate of Mastery, may also retake MCAS several times. This plan also includes the development of models within state colleges and universities that will provide students who did not pass MCAS by the time they graduated “unlimited state-funded opportunities” (p. 2) to pass MCAS.

In addition, the Board has decided to award certificates—not the equivalent of a graduation diploma—to students who fail to pass the required MCAS tests but who fulfill
other graduation requirements (Massachusetts BOE, 2000a). They have also decided to award a Certificate of Mastery to those students who score at the Proficient or Advanced levels on the MCAS Mathematics and English Language Arts tests (Massachusetts BOE, 2000b). This Certificate of Mastery is intended to serve as an incentive for students by rewarding high test performers with a tuition waiver for a Massachusetts state college or university.

What Type of Test is MCAS, and How Are the Scores Determined?

MCAS is a criterion-referenced test, which means that students are evaluated on how well they are able to perform according to a specific set of criteria laid out in the Commonwealth’s curriculum frameworks. In other words, this test is not a norm-referenced test that presents how well students performed relative to other students who took the test, and it does not report percentile rankings.

Every year, once the tests have been given a raw score, the Massachusetts DOE forms a panel of teachers, administrators, legislators, and businesspersons to determine the cut scores and to establish what type of work falls into the appropriate performance levels. For three days, the panel reads a stack of student answers, makes judgments about the quality of work according to specified criteria, and sorts the papers into the appropriate performance levels (Nelhaus, Interview, September 21, 1999). The panel then looks over all the papers in a given performance level to determine the cut scores. For example, if 18 out of 20 panelists were putting papers with 58 and above at the Advanced level, then the panel sets the cut score for Advanced at 58. The test-makers then use these cut scores to assign each student’s test to a particular performance level.
Who Takes MCAS?

All of the literature about MCAS states that these tests are for *all* public school students in grades 4, 8, and 10. *All* students includes vocational education students, students with disabilities, LEP students, students enrolled in charter schools, students who receive publicly funded special education in 766-approved private schools, students receiving educational services in institutional settings, and students enrolled in educational collaboratives (Massachusetts Department of Education [DOE], 1999c). The DOE describes the specific arrangements for LEP students and students with disabilities.

Students with disabilities. Both the Massachusetts Education Reform Law of 1993 and the 1997 amendment to the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA-97) support the decision to include students with disabilities in this assessment system. Requiring students with disabilities to take MCAS tests is grounded in the belief that all students should have an “opportunity to learn,” which the Commonwealth defines as learning what is laid out in the curriculum frameworks for each subject. The Commonwealth believes that schools and teachers will be motivated to direct instruction and resources towards students who will be tested, and that students with disabilities should not be exempt from these resources (Massachusetts DOE, 1999c).

Students with disabilities—defined as students who have Individual Education Plans (IEPs) or a plan of instructional accommodations provided under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973—are required to take the MCAS test under routine conditions (like their peers), or they are given specific test accommodations, including alternative test timing, scheduling, or presentation (for example, large-print texts or Braille). Only under the rarest conditions will students be exempted from taking the traditional MCAS
tests; however, these students must then be given some alternative assessments to measure their knowledge and performance. Students' IEPs determine decisions about test accommodations or alternative assessments. Accommodations that are prohibited include providing a scribe (a person who writes what a student dictates) for the English Composition test, reading (or signing) any portion of the English Language Arts test, using a calculator in any grade 4 test or any non-calculator portion of grades 8 and 10 tests, and administering a test that does not match equally one’s grade level with one’s chronological age (Massachusetts DOE, 1999b).

**LEP students.** The Commonwealth requires most students with limited English proficiency to take the MCAS test, and the DOE defines LEP students as follows:

- Students who are enrolled in a Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) program or who receive English as a Second Language (ESL) support; or
- Students who were *not* born in the United States whose native language is a language other than English and who are currently not able to perform ordinary classroom work in English; or
- Students who were born in the United States to non-English-speaking parents and who are not currently able to perform ordinary classroom work in English. (Massachusetts DOE, 1998b)

LEP students are required to take the MCAS tests if they have been enrolled in school in the United States for more than three years, or if they are currently enrolled in a TBE program or receive ESL support and have been recommended for regular classes for the next school year, or if they are in a two-way bilingual program for three or fewer years, but will likely be transitioned to regular classes (Massachusetts DOE, 1998b).

Presently, the Commonwealth has developed one MCAS test in a language other than English. That is, MCAS tests in mathematics, science and technology, and history and social science are now available in Spanish. LEP students who are native-Spanish
speaking students can take these MCAS tests if they do not meet the criteria described above for taking the English-version of MCAS (Massachusetts DOE, 1998b). Students who are native speakers of languages other than English and Spanish, and who have been enrolled in schools in the United States three years or fewer, and who are not recommended for regular classes currently, are exempt from taking the MCAS tests. Jeff Nelhaus did state that the Board of Education is looking into developing an ESL test that would be given annually to any student who qualifies for ESL status (Nelhaus, Interview, September 21, 1999).

The Development of the MCAS Test in English Language Arts

The Massachusetts BOE is in charge of overseeing the development of MCAS tests, and this development is a collaborative effort of the DOE, committees of Massachusetts teachers and scholars, and the test contractor, Harcourt Educational Measurement5. Nelhaus stated that before the individual test development committees met with the test contractor, a general test development committee—made up of DOE personnel, test contractors, and classroom teachers—created what he calls a “blueprint” (the number and types of questions) for the test. This blueprint is the overall test design, which instructs individual committees on the number and types of questions to include on the test, and which curriculum framework standards should be emphasized (Nelhaus, Interview, September 21, 1999).

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5 During the first three years of implementing MCAS (and at the time I interviewed person’s from the test development committee), Advanced Systems in Measurement and Evaluation was the test contractor. In 2000, this company lost the bid to develop and run MCAS to Harcourt Educational Measurement. According to Nelhaus, choosing Harcourt Educational Measurement would save the state $25 million dollars, and Harcourt promised a quicker turnaround rate on results. Yet, recently California hit Harcourt Educational Measurement with a $1.1 million fine for administrative errors, and Vermont received rebates because the company made scoring mistakes in 1998 and 1999 (Boser, 2000).
The Board of Education formed the English Language Arts Assessment Development Committee, which consists of 17 (1997-1998) to 18 members (1996-1997). The members of this committee are teachers and administrators from public schools/districts from around the Commonwealth, and consultants from Massachusetts universities and colleges. I interviewed several members of the tenth grade section of the English Language Arts Assessment Development Committee to determine how this MCAS test was constructed. Committee member, David Roach, superintendent of Millbury Public Schools, explained that the committee's first job was to select reading passages by gathering passages from a variety of sources: “[The committee] basically put a book of passages together, and people read them, and evaluated them for readability, for interest, for passages that could be used to test the standards….These passages were debated for literally hours until they found the right passages” (Roach, Interview, August 24, 1999). The Committee was guided first by the question of what would be good passages to read, but they were mindful that the passages they selected would drive the English curriculum in the Commonwealth:

The whole…philosophy of the committee was that they wanted a test that taught reading and writing, and that would make kids respond to good literature…and write about literature…[The Committee wanted students to] refer back to the [literature] in forming their answers, and…use textual support for whatever proposition they were advancing in their answer….So, there was a decent match between what was happening in most classrooms, and should be happening in a lot more and wasn’t: (Roach, Interview, August 24, 1999)

Another committee member, Anne Steele, assistant principal for curriculum and assessment at Shrewsbury High School, stated that 60 percent of the reading passages are taken from literary works and 40 percent are taken from practical information texts, something the Commonwealth calls informational texts (Steele, Interview, September 10,
1999). Literary texts include short stories, novel excerpts, poetry, drama, myths/legends/fables, biographies/autobiographies, essays and speeches. Informational texts include interviews, letters, newspaper articles, advertisements, instructions, and editorials (Massachusetts DOE, 1998a).

Authors listed in Appendices A and B of the English Language Arts Curriculum Framework (Massachusetts DOE, 1997) are represented in many of the selected reading passages. Nonetheless, the Committee was careful not to select reading passages that are commonly taught in high schools because they did not want to give any student an advantage over any other student. For example, it is unlikely that students will read a passage from Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet on MCAS because that text is highly anthologized, and ninth and tenth grade students often study this play. On the other hand, students may find a passage from another Shakespearean play, one that is not typically studied in high school (Roach, Interview, August 24, 1999).

The Committee was also charged with developing questions for MCAS. Both Anne Steele and David Roach stated that they and the Committee spent a great deal of time rereading the English Language Arts Curriculum Frameworks (Massachusetts, DOE, 1997) as they constructed the test questions in an attempt to cover as many learning strands as possible. David Roach, likewise, said that a “traditional” philosophy guided the Committee’s construction of test questions. He said this test was intended to teach reading and writing, center on good literature, and ask students to supply textual support for their answers. According to Roach, the people on the Committee wrote questions based on their own experiences as English teachers (Roach, Interview, August 24, 1999).
Once the Committee selected passages and constructed test questions, they turned over these items to the testing contractor personnel who then checked the readability of the passages. In addition, both the passages and the test questions were sent to a Bias Review Committee whose job it was to ensure that none of the reading passages and questions contained racial, cultural, religious, or gender bias. Some passages were eliminated, and questions were either reconstructed or thrown out (Penniman, Interview, September 10, 1999). Testing contractors then field-tested drafts of the MCAS exam in Massachusetts as well as in other states. These field-tested items then went back to the Committee for further review and discussion. Each year the testing company field-tests passages and questions as part of the MCAS test students take, but these field-tested items are not included in students’ scores.

Content and Components of the MCAS Test in English Language Arts

The MCAS test in English Language Arts specifically evaluates three content strands—language, literature, and composition—of the English Language Arts Curriculum Framework (Massachusetts, DOE, 1997). Because this is a large-scale, pencil-and-paper test, MCAS does not test certain strands such as those in the Media strand of the framework. There are two components of the test. The first component or section assesses language and literature, and the second section evaluates composition skills. The section on literature and language uses multiple choice and open-response questions to be answered after students complete specific reading passages. The open-response questions are intended to assess skills related to literature and language only. Students’ writing skills are not supposed to be assessed through these open-response questions.
The second section of the English Language Arts portion of MCAS assesses students’ writing skills. This section, the composition component, is administered in one long session, where students have 90 minutes to write an essay. In this session, students respond to a writing prompt, but they are not required to remember specific details of any piece of literature. The long composition differs for each grade level tested. Fourth graders write narratives; eighth graders write persuasive essays; and tenth graders write literary analysis essays. The long composition is structured to give students an opportunity to use process writing skills. That is, students are given time to brainstorm, draft, and revise. Unlike the literature and language section of the test, where students are not permitted to use dictionaries, students are encouraged to use a dictionary for assistance in writing their long compositions.

Scoring the MCAS test in English Language Arts and How the Scores Are Reported

Employees of Harcourt Educational Measurement score the open-response questions for all subject matter MCAS tests, and these questions are all scored using a rubric called the “General Scoring Guide.” The general categories and descriptions range from a high score of four, meaning a student “generalizes theme and supports with details from the text” to a low of zero, meaning a students’ response is either “totally irrelevant,” “totally wrong,” or “provides no evidence of appropriate reasoning.” Although this represents the general scoring guide, for each open-response question there exists a more specific description of scoring criteria (Massachusetts DOE, 1999a).

Massachusetts teachers, as well as trained scorers from the testing company, score the long compositions; two scorers evaluate each composition. The compositions are evaluated using two criteria: topic/idea development (based on a 1-6 score point scale)
and standard English conventions (based on a 1-4 score). The most any student can earn for a composition is 10 points per scorer (total 20 points). The MCAS Writing Scoring Guide (Long Composition) is a complicated rubric, which contains descriptors and codes (see Appendix A).

All scorers are trained in a systematic manner. First, scorers answer each test question or writing prompt themselves as if they were test-takers. They review the content of each question, discuss scoring rubrics, and benchmark student responses. Scorers then score a set of responses from a training pack and discuss these responses and the scores assigned to them with a group of other scorers and a trainer. They then score another set of responses from a qualifying pack and, if necessary, are retrained until they meet the established standards for score reliability for every test question or writing prompt that will be scored (Massachusetts DOE, 1998a). Steele, who was a trainer and table leader for the MCAS scoring session, explains what happens when there is a discrepancy among scores:

If there's more than a one-point difference, the two people have to get up...go into a room and sit and read the paper and discuss it with all those points and the anchors. If they can't...agree, then I step in and the assistant chief reader will step in and the chief reader. Some of these papers—even though we're talking about over 200,000 papers—were read four, five, and six times. (Steele, Interview, September, 10, 1999)

For the open-response answers and more recently for the long composition essay, scorers view electronic copies of student responses on a computer monitor and assign scores electronically, assuring that scores are randomly assigned and that second readings are truly blind (Massachusetts DOE, 1998a).
Responses to MCAS

There is a great deal of concern regarding MCAS in communities and schools across the Commonwealth. Some complaints about MCAS include the difficulties managing, administering, and distributing tests and scores (O'Shea, 1999). Others are concerned about emotional trauma to children who are having nightmares months in advance about having to take these tests. Some criticisms center on the amount of time it takes students to receive their test scores (Tantrophol, 1999a) and the amount of time it takes students to take the exams—between 15 and 17 hours of school time (Ginely, 1999; Pressely, 1999a). Recently, Acting Governor Jane Swift (2001) answered the criticism regarding the time it takes students to complete the MCAS exams. In a report she presented to former Governor Paul Cellucci\(^6\), Swift states that it is a myth that MCAS requires 15 to 20 hours of teaching time. According to her calculations, tenth graders should spend only eight hours and 45 minutes taking MCAS tests.

More serious complaints center on some of the same issues that have been debated in the national forum. The first is the issue of accountability. Educators, parents, and other interested parties have been quite vocal about the unfairness of these exams being used as the sole arbiter for judging students' performance (Tantraphol, 1999c; Ginely, 1999). In a recent survey of Massachusetts Teacher Association members, 80 percent of the 26,620 respondents stated that they do not believe the current MCAS tests adequately measure student performance, nor do they believe that these tests should be the only criteria for allowing students to graduate high school (Gorrie, 1999). Swift

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\(^6\) At the time this study was conducted, Paul Cellucci was the governor of Massachusetts and Jane Swift was the lieutenant governor. However, on April 5, 2001, the U.S. Senate confirmed Paul Cellucci as ambassador to Canada, and Jane Swift was named acting governor of Massachusetts (Washington & Milligan, 2001). When Swift wrote this report, she was the lieutenant governor of Massachusetts, and Cellucci was governor.
(2001) calls this accusation a myth as well because students must complete course, attendance, and credit requirements in order to graduate from high school.

Critics such as the FairTest, the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, and its off-shoot organization, the Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education (CARE), remind Massachusetts policymakers that the Education Reform Act of 1993 calls for a system of assessments, not a one-shot standardized test. In a statement on MCAS, FairTest member Karen Hartke (1999) said that alternative assessment methods need to be developed because one standardized paper and pencil test cannot provide complete or accurate information about student achievement. Many believe that instead of strengthening the educational system, it will weaken it, and even cause serious damage (Hartke, 1999).

One serious damaging effect that critics fear is a high dropout rate among students who feel as if they have no chance of passing MCAS (Ginely, 1999; Pressley, 1999b). Little research has been conducted on the connection between high-stakes assessments and increases in dropout rates. Yet, a study conducted by The National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy found that high-stakes high school exit exams, together with grade retention practices, is associated with decreased rates of high school completion (Clarke, Haney, Madaus, Lynch, & Lynch, 2000). Yet, Jeff Nelhaus responded to fears about rising dropout rates as follows:

We’re going to have to...work closely with kids who don’t pass the test the first time to make sure they feel that they have the support to do it,...and that it’s not a foregone conclusion that they’re not going to get a diploma... It’s sort of like when people go to pass the Bar to become a lawyer. The failure rates are high, but then people study a little harder and pass it the second time around....The critics say that you can’t do this because kids are going to drop out of school....On the other hand, we can be just as critical and say, “What’s better? That they drop out of school, or that we graduate them without the skills because we never held them to a higher standard?” So, it’s not like we’re serving the kids that well under
the current system where they’re being passed through, and they’re graduating without really [being able to] read, write, and compute at some level that’s going to get them out of a dead-end job. So...we’re hoping that this will be more of a service to kids than a downside. (Nelhaus, Interview, September 21, 1999)

Many fear how this test will affect minority and disadvantaged students. The results from the 1998 test revealed that schools in the state’s poorest communities fared much worse than those in more affluent communities (Tantraphol, 1999c; Pressley, 1999b). One only needs to look at the scores reported for Holyoke, a school district serving a high number of poor and minority students, and Wellesley, a school district serving a number of homogeneous, middle class students, to see the disparities. In Wellesley, only seven percent of the students received a failing score on the tenth grade English Language Arts MCAS exam, while 48 percent of students in Holyoke received a failing score on the same exam. Furthermore, a recent study by the University of Massachusetts revealed that the new passing score regulations will mean that 83 percent of Latinos and 80 percent of African-Americans will not graduate from high school if “passing” the MCAS test is required (Goldberg, 1999). In fact, some critics have even gone so far as to say that educational reform efforts such as high stakes testing in Massachusetts is a subtle, albeit systematic, way to continue to stratify the population (Kraft, 1999).

The contract with Harcourt Educational Measurement is costing Massachusetts taxpayers $76 million (Boser, 2000), and concerns over this exorbitant amount of money have made people question the worth of such a reform effort. Ginley (1999) voiced concerns of several educators when she said, “I am against spending millions of dollars for that testing. Use that money to reduce class size instead. I’m particularly against
spending millions of taxpayer dollars for a test that clearly is designed so many children
will fail."

Parents, students, and teachers have not been silent in the MCAS debates. In fact, several
students refused to take the 1999 and 2000 MCAS tests as an act of civil disobedience
(Gehring, 2000b; Pressley, 1999a; Pressley, 1999b). Several parents refused to send their
children to school on MCAS testing days, saying, “Taking 20 hours of testing teaches you
nothing except how to take a test” (Steve Cohen quoted in Pressley, 1999a). Parents have
objected to MCAS because they believe the test is too long, it labels children as smart or
dumb, and it forces teachers to set aside valuable teaching activities to teach students
how to take the test (Pressely, 1999a; Pressley, 1999b). Teachers, as part of teachers
unions, have fought MCAS as well. In November 2000, one week before the state released
the 1999 MCAS scores, the Massachusetts Teachers Association launched a $600,000
advertising campaign that attacked MCAS. This television ad urged viewers to “Say no to
the MCAS graduation requirement” (Gehring, 2000a).
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RESEARCH RELEVANT TO THE EFFECT OF HIGH-STAKES TESTING OF STUDENTS ON THE WORK OF CLASSROOM TEACHERS

Introduction

The use of high-stakes testing of students has become a common part of the national standards movement. Yet, critics have been asking for evidence that demonstrates a positive relationship between standardized tests and teaching and learning (Mehrens, 1998). My review of the literature examines the relatively finite and recent research evidence of the relationship between high-stakes tests and the work of teachers. Throughout this review, I posed two types of questions as they related to my study on Massachusetts tests and secondary English teachers: questions that other studies raise that I imposed specifically on MCAS tests, and questions that had never been asked in research studies about how high-stakes testing affects teachers. These questions helped me think about the design of my study.

As this study centers on English teachers’ experiences with high-stakes testing, I reviewed research on English teachers and high-stakes testing for students. Nonetheless, because there is little research on just English teachers, I reviewed the research literature on how high-stakes testing affects the work of K-12 classroom teachers. I did not review literature on the effects of these tests on college instructors, nor did I look at the tests teachers must pass in order to receive teacher certification or licensure. In addition, I centered my review of research on studies conducted primarily in the United States. Nevertheless, I found a few studies that discuss how testing affects teachers in other Western countries, and I included these studies because I believe they could inform my own research.
Although my study centered on more current performance-based and curriculum-centered, criterion-referenced testing efforts, the literature I reviewed consists of studies on a variety of standardized tests: norm-referenced tests, minimum-competency tests, tests of basic skills, basic literacy tests, and performance- and curriculum-based tests. I found that with few exceptions, it does not matter what type of test is required. When these tests are externally constructed, mandated, and attached to certain stakes (sanctions, rewards, promotion, and graduation), they affect teachers.

In general, the research literature shows that high-stakes testing influences teachers in their ability to make curricular decisions and deliver instruction, and in how high-stakes tests affect them emotionally. I organized this review of literature according to the categories listed above. Nonetheless, all of these themes or categories are integrally connected. It is difficult to talk about curriculum without discussing instruction, and it is impossible to talk about the effects of testing on curriculum and instruction without discussing how teachers are affected emotionally. Since these effects cannot be separated, there necessarily was some overlap.

The Effects of High-Stakes Testing on Curriculum

Narrowing of Curriculum

Proponents of high-stakes testing assume that these examinations will reform curriculum for the better because teachers will know exactly what content to teach. The literature shows that this type of testing does affect curriculum, and that the higher the stakes or even perceived stakes (Madaus, 1988), the more teachers aligned their curricula to test content (Corbett & Wilson, 1987; 1989). Many studies show standardized and high-stakes tests tend to affect teachers’ curricular decisions by forcing teachers to
narrow their curriculum to the content that is tested (Cooper & Davies, 1993; Corbett & Wilson, 1987; Herman, Golan & Dreyfus, 1990; Jones et al., 1999; Koretz et al., 1991; Rosenholtz, 1987; Shepard & Dougherty, 1991; Smith, 1991a). Teachers feel a tension between covering basics skills and mastering them in this narrowed, standardized curriculum (Rosenholtz, 1987). Several studies of elementary school teachers reveal that these teachers often neglect certain subjects that are not tested (Herman, Abedi & Golan, 1994; Jones et al., 1999; Shepard & Dougherty, 1991; Smith, 1991b).

For example, Shepard and Dougherty (1991) conducted a survey study in which 360 third, fifth, and sixth grade teachers from 100 schools in two school districts completed a questionnaire on test preparation practices. Teachers stated that because of pressure to increase test scores, they gave less emphasis to subjects not tested, which were social studies and science in these districts.

A more recent example of the narrowing of the elementary school curriculum is a study conducted by Jones et al. (1999) in which a survey of 236 North Carolina elementary teachers revealed that teachers focus specifically on material that will be tested—reading, writing and mathematics. Two-thirds reported that they now spend more time on reading and writing, and 56 percent reported spending more time on mathematics. Moreover, information in those subjects that involve higher order thinking skills and problem solving often fall by the wayside. Science and social studies get minimal coverage, and one teacher even reported that her principal would not support the teaching of science.

A study by Smith (1991b) shows that the curriculum narrows even further as the time to take the test draws near. Teachers also reported changing the sequence of their
curriculum to match the sequence of test content or to make sure all the tested content is covered before the testing date (Smith, 1991a). According to Smith (1991a), if teachers judge that teaching test content equals good or sound teaching, then this belief indicates that what is tested is important. In her ethnographic study of two elementary schools in Phoenix, Arizona, she discovered that one school believed that the test was so important that they changed to an entirely test-based curriculum.

One has to ask, is narrowing curriculum really a negative consequence of testing? If the content of the test is appropriate for students at a particular grade level, then will not teaching test content only help teachers make appropriate curricular decisions? Also, if elementary students lack basic literacy and numeracy skills, would it not serve students well for teachers to reduce time spent on subjects such as social studies and science? Although many teachers in the studies described above report the negative consequences of external testing on curriculum, not all teachers felt that way. Many teachers believed that standardizing the curriculum is a positive change because it ensures that a body of knowledge is covered, places the onus on the students (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1985), and helps them plan curriculum (Howe & Thames, 1996; Sinkule, 1996).

Another question, is why do teachers, as in the Jones et al. (1999) study, tend to ignore content that develops higher-order thinking skills? Do the tests fail to evaluate these skills, or do teachers only assume that they do? How familiar are teachers with the content of the test? Do teachers have access to previously administered tests, a small sampling of questions, or just a simple description of the content? In Massachusetts, teachers have full access to previous MCAS tests. Do Massachusetts teachers use these tests to plan their curricula? Do they value the tested content?
Secondary teachers are not exempt from narrowing the curriculum when they feel pressure to prepare students to take standardized tests (Cooper & Davies, 1993; Suhor, 1985; Wideen, O’Shea & Pye, 1997; Zancanella, 1992). Suhor (1985) found that when a test included writing samples, teachers taught more writing, students produced more writing, and administrators valued writing as part of the curriculum. Yet, Suhor mentions nothing about the quality of this writing. In schools where a strong writing program already existed, teachers narrowed their curriculum to teach a specific type of writing to fit the test, which was a specific formulaic type of writing.

Another example of secondary teachers narrowing the curriculum is a study conducted in Canada where the government instituted large-scale, exit examinations in reading, language arts, and science (Wideen, O’Shea & Pye, 1997). These tests are used for 40 percent of grade 12 students’ final grades as well as for scholarships and college admissions. This study on the effects of high-stakes testing and the teaching of science revealed that twelfth grade teachers narrowed their science curriculum to match the examination. Teachers reported that they no longer could cover topics in depth and that some important topics had to be eliminated in an effort to concentrate on the core requirements. In addition, teachers often reduced the number of laboratory experiments and condensed curriculum to little more than presenting “a string of facts to be memorized for the final examination” (p. 439). These teachers also reported that if they discussed a topic not covered on the test, students would not pay attention.

Cooper and Davies (1993) conducted a study of the impact of the national curriculum assessments in Great Britain on English teachers’ thinking and practices. These researchers conducted case studies of two secondary English teachers and
collected daily self-completed questionnaires from English teachers in 26 schools. These questionnaires asked teachers to provide their day-to-day perceptions of the United Kingdom’s Standard Assessment Tasks (SAT). The national curriculum was instituted a few years prior to the implementation of the national exams. The teachers in this study reported that they generally favored the national curriculum in English because it centered on the idea that English was a means of developing skills and knowledge that enabled students to analyze, interpret and engage actively in a modern society. The SAT in English did not mirror these ideals; it was not compatible with the idea that English was a subjective, interactive discipline. In addition, the tests required students to know prescribed texts (for example, specific Shakespearean texts and poetry from a specific anthology). Although several teachers resisted and even protested the content of these exams, this study showed that almost all of them conformed their curricula to match the content of tests. They taught the prescribed texts, taught test-taking skills, and shifted their curricula away from language-based work that the national curriculum originally prescribed.

These studies led me to wonder if secondary English teachers in Massachusetts have similar experiences as the teachers in these studies. Do Massachusetts English teachers find that they are covering topics in less depth like the science teachers in Wideen, O’Shea and Pye’s (1997) study? Do teachers feel as if they have to present curriculum as a “string of facts to be memorized” (p. 439)? Unlike the tests in the Cooper and Davis (1993) study, MCAS does not require English teachers to present specific texts, but do Massachusetts English teachers shift their curricula to match test
content? If so, in what ways? What content gets privileged? What curriculum is eliminated?

Suhor's (1985) study on the relationship between tests and writing curriculum shows teachers and administrators tend to privilege the content—in this case, writing—of standardized tests. MCAS tests require a great deal of writing on all subject matter tests. Are teachers teaching more writing because of MCAS? Are they teaching a specific type of writing—for example, process writing, current-traditional writing, formulaic writing? Do teachers neglect creative or personal writing as MCAS does not require this type of writing? Do teachers value the type of writing that MCAS requires? Do English teachers feel that their colleagues value their work more because of MCAS? Do English teachers work collaboratively with other subject matter teachers to teach writing?

Disjuncture Between Philosophies about Content and Teaching

Like studies conducted by Cooper and Davies (1993) and Wideen et al. (1997), other studies show that teachers often experience a great disjuncture between their philosophies about teaching a particular subject and the philosophies that the test embodies (Brown, 1993; Zancanella, 1992). Zancanella's (1992) ethnographic case study of three middle school language arts teachers showed that this disjuncture caused stress for one particular teacher, Ms. Kelly, a novice teacher who felt pressure to focus her curriculum and instruction on literary terms and concepts, an approach that the state tests used. Yet, her personal preference was to focus her curriculum and instruction on affect or the relationship between literature and the students' own experiences. She wanted students to appreciate literature and bring it to life in their imaginations.
Ms. Martin, an experienced English teacher and department chair, also believed in an affective approach to teaching literature. Her goal was to help students become lifelong readers. Unlike Ms. Kelly, Ms. Martin was able to resist changing her curriculum and instruction to be in alignment with the test. According to Zancanella, Ms. Martin was successful in her resistance because she had “curricular power” as an experienced teacher and as a department chairperson. Zancanella concludes that not all teachers adjust their curriculum to match the content of the test. Rather, changes in curriculum and instruction can be attributed to (a) the fit between the teacher’s preferred approach to teaching and the state’s conception of a subject, and (b) the amount of curricular power one has. Stephens et al. (1995) agree with this finding. They state that there is a complex relationship between testing, instruction, and decision-making. Often teachers change their curriculum and instruction to match external assessments because they lack decision-making power to do otherwise.

One question to ask English teachers in this study is, what are their philosophies about English as a subject? Is the content of the tenth grade MCAS test consistent with their philosophies about the teaching of reading, literature, writing, and language? For example, would teachers who believe in a reader-response theory of teaching literature find it difficult to prepare students to take MCAS? Are there English teachers who will resist making adjustments in their curricula? If so, why and how are they able to resist? From where does this power or perceived power to resist come—from the number of years of teaching experience, teaching position, support from administration, or other factors? What are the consequences of exercising curricular power?
Test-Preparation Curriculum

Often the curriculum becomes test-oriented, which means that testing skills not only become the focus of the curriculum, but at times they are the curriculum (Corbett & Wilson, 1989; Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1985; Jones et al., 1999; Lomax et al., 1995; Shannon, 1986). Teachers approach the development of a test preparation curriculum in a number of ways. Some refer to prior tests to make sure they cover the content, tailor the curriculum to test objectives, and/or make adjustments based on previous students’ performance (Herman & Golan, 1991). Others focus curriculum on specific test-taking skills such as how to transfer answers to answer sheets and how to eliminate distracters (Smith, 1991a). One group of teachers used a systematic approach to test preparation by adopting a particular curriculum and instruction program. This was the case for the teachers in Shannon’s (1986) study. One group of teachers in a particular district taught a prescribed reading program based on sub-skills to raise students’ test scores.

One striking discovery was that disadvantaged, minority, and/or low socio-economic students are more likely than their counterparts to receive a test-preparation curriculum (Herman, Abedi & Golan, 1994; Herman & Golan, 1991; Herman, Golan & Dreyfus, 1990; Lomax et al., 1995). An example of this is the Lomax et al. (1995) study on the nature and impact of mandated testing programs on minority students. Specifically, this team of researchers examined minority students’ opportunities for and access to quality curriculum and instruction in math and science. Lomax et al. evaluated six standardized tests for students in grades 4, 8 and high school; they surveyed 2,229 fourth through twelfth grade teachers about standardized testing and its impact on ethnic minority students, teaching, and instruction; they then conducted site interviews with 90
administrators and 199 math and science teachers (grades 4 through 12) who taught average or below average students. Their results showed the amount and type of standardized testing preparation was more extensive for classes with a high number of minority students. Students in these classes were taught more test-taking skills, used more test preparation materials, and took practice tests more often. In addition, those teaching classes with a high number of minority students were more likely to adapt the curriculum to match external tests, and even alter the format and content of their own teacher-made tests. In general, these students receive a steady curriculum that reflects low-level conceptual knowledge.

Have teachers in this study adjusted their curricula to focus on test-taking skills? If so, why and on what are they basing their curricular decisions? My study centered on teachers from a variety of settings—rural, suburban, and urban. Do teachers who teach classes with a high number of minority students feel more pressure than other teachers to prepare students to take MCAS? Do teachers of minority or disadvantaged students use more test-prep materials and more often help students practice taking MCAS tests than teachers of white, middle class students? If so, why?

Authentic Performance-Based Assessments and Their Impact on Curriculum

Over the past 10 years or so, there has been a movement to increase the authenticity of assessment tasks to better match current philosophies (for example, constructivism or inquiry-based teaching) about teaching and learning (National Research Council, 1999). Wiggins (1993) discusses the difference between performance on traditional standardized tests and performance for more authentic assessments by using the metaphor of playing soccer. He states that performance on multiple choice test items
is like practicing isolated drills, which is "deliberately simplified and decontextualized" (p. 202). On the other hand, performance of playing in a real soccer game is more authentic because it is contextual, requires constant judgment, and emphasizes "habits of the mind" (p. 202). The key distinction is between performance assessment and authentic assessment. All tests require students to perform, but not all performance is authentic, that is a performance that mirrors real world activities, knowledge, and judgment. This line of thinking has prompted test-makers to create performance-based tests that require students to complete more than multiple-choice questions. These authentic performance-based forms of assessment include a range of test formats or items: constructed response items, essays, portfolios, exhibitions, and experiments (National Research Council, 1999; Office of Technology Assessment, 1992). No current performance-based standardized test offers the full range of test items. On a continuum, some tests offer more opportunities for authentic assessment than others. One question to ask would be, what type of performances are tenth grade students demonstrating through the MCAS English Language Arts test? Are these performances truly authentic? That is, do students perform tasks that mirror real world literacy activities, knowledge, and judgment, or do they mirror school-world literacy activities, knowledge, and judgment? Is there a connection or disconnection between the two?

Studies on standardized state tests that offer authentic assessment tasks reveal that, although teachers are aligning their curricula with these tests, they generally consider the test content to be consistent with their philosophies about what constitutes effective teaching (Howe & Thames, 1996; Koretz et al, 1996; Wolf & McIver, 1998). In fact, the teachers in the Howe and Thames (1996) study on reading teachers' perceptions
of the new authentic performance-based tests in Mississippi reported that this new test format was useful in developing teaching strategies and curriculum. Also, Wolf and McIver’s (1998) case study of a middle school language arts teacher showed that this teacher thought the current authentic performance-based assessment system in Kentucky was aligned with his own ideas about developing a rich and varied writing curriculum.

Kentucky was one of the first states to develop authentic performance-based and curriculum-centered tests. This system, known as the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS), was a statewide exam to measure achievement against standards for expected performance, much like the Massachusetts MCAS tests. Where KIRIS and MCAS differ is in the type of authentic assessment tasks that each test requires. While MCAS includes constructed response items and a long composition essay, the KIRIS test requires students to complete several different authentic tasks, including open-ended questions, performance events (individual and collaborative), and portfolios in both mathematics and writing (Koretz, et al., 1996).

Koretz et al. (1996) studied the perceived effects of KIRIS. They surveyed 209 teachers and conducted phone interviews with 216 fourth and eighth grade math teachers and 115 school principals. Koretz et al. discovered that, as with other studies, there was a widespread effort to align their curriculum to the test and part of the curricula centered on test-taking skills. Yet, over half the teachers agreed that the authentic performance assessment tasks of the KIRIS strongly resembled what teachers teach. Therefore, teachers seemed to perceive these tests as having a positive impact on their curricula.

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7 In 1998, Kentucky education officials replaced its original testing system that included the performance assessment tasks I discuss above with a more traditional and reliable test. This new assessment system, Commonwealth Accountability Testing System, no longer includes portfolio assessment (McDermott, 2001).
MCAS seems to be a mix between traditional standardized tests and authentic performance-based tests like the Kentucky KIRIS. Students taking MCAS must demonstrate performance through comprehending reading passages, answering multiple-choice questions, and writing in response to specific prompts, something testing experts call constructed-response items (McDermott, 2001). Yet, students do not have an opportunity to demonstrate performance through more authentic assessments such as portfolios or performance events. Do English teachers think the MCAS test is aligned with their own ideas about curriculum and instruction? What do teachers believe are curricular and instructional gains associated with MCAS testing? What are the losses?

Effects of High-Stakes Testing on Instructional Practices

As seen with the development of curriculum, standards for student achievement developed by states and districts are intended to influence the action of teachers (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1985). Other than research on more current authentic performance-based tests such as the Kentucky KIRIS tests (Howe & Thames, 1996; Wolf & McIver, 1998), research shows that teachers report that standardized tests negatively affect teachers’ instructional practices. Several studies have shown that teachers often resort to teaching to the test in ways that foster lower-level thinking skills such as rote memorization and superficial reading skills (Cooper & Davies, 1993; Herman & Golan, 1991; Shepard & Dougherty, 1991). Furthermore, many studies reveal that students from low SES or minority backgrounds are more likely to receive instruction in lower-level thinking skills and test preparation skills (Herman & Golan, 1991; Herman, Golan & Dreyfus, 1990; Lomax et al., 1995; Monsaas & Engelhard, 1994).
Because of pressure to squeeze in content before the test date, teachers often forego inquiry, constructivist, and student-centered teaching strategies. This finding is clear in Cooper and Davies' (1993) study of the effect of the British SAT exams on teachers of English. These teachers had been working from a student-centered approach to teaching literature, which was consistent with the national curriculum. Nonetheless, once teachers were required to prepare students for the SAT exam, they reported that they were forced to abandon their interactive teaching style, which privileged student involvement. Teachers stated that one of the primary reasons for this shift was that they felt pressed for time to cover the content and skills on which students would be evaluated. This time-crunch affected their pedagogy in several ways: right answers were valued more; there was less time for thinking, talking and developing responses to literature; and reading became a more superficial activity. Similarly, a cross-national study of middle school English teachers from Great Britain and Texas revealed that in general the external assessments drove instruction (Ferree, 1997). Teachers from both countries spent more time on text analysis and close reading techniques, and ceased giving students choices about what they could read.

The literature shows that teachers tend to conduct more lectures and assign seatwork and worksheets, all of which take a great deal of time away from other instruction (Brown, 1992; Cooper & Davies, 1993; Shannon, 1986; Shepard & Dougherty, 1991; Wideen, O’Shea & Pye, 1992; 1997). Shepard and Dougherty (1991) report that teachers spent more time on basic skills such as word recognition skills. Half of the 360 third, fifth, and sixth grade teachers reported spending four or more weeks giving worksheets to review test content and practice the test format. The majority stated
they spent two weeks out of the year giving commercially prepared test preparation materials, practice tests, or direct instruction on test-taking strategies. Finally, 68 percent stated that they conducted test preparation strategies such as those discussed previously on a regular basis throughout the year.

Like Shepard and Dougherty’s study, Brown’s (1992; 1993) interview study of 30 fifth and sixth grade teachers showed testing altered teachers’ instructional practices. Teachers stated that they were reluctant to use innovative instructional methods. Instead, they resorted to using fewer creative and in-depth projects, less literature-based instruction (more skills), less teaching of local topics, and fewer activities geared towards integrative curriculum and higher-order thinking skills.

In addition, teachers report fewer opportunities for depth, spontaneity, problem solving, trips to the library, and collaborative work (Brown, 1992; Ferree, 1997; Wideen, O’Shea & Pye, 1997). Wideen, O’Shea, and Pye (1992; 1997) studied Canadian teachers in grades 8, 10, and 12 with twelfth graders being the only ones required to take mandated standardized tests. These researchers discovered that, as students advanced in school, the type of instruction they received changed dramatically. Laboratory work decreased with increasing grade level, and seatwork and lecturing increased. The data shows that by grade 12 students spent only two percent of their time on higher-order thinking skills such as synthesis and evaluation.

The exception to the rule of minimizing higher-order thinking skills and student-centered instruction are studies on authentic performance-based tests (Howe & Thames, 1996; Koretz et al, 1996; Wolf & McIver, 1998). Although teachers in these studies do report teaching students test-taking skills, the nature of these tests makes test preparation
fairly consistent with their regular instructional strategies. In the Koretz et al. (1996) study of the Kentucky KIRIS test, teachers reported that the test had a positive influence on instruction: more experimenting with methods, using more group work, teaching more writing, and emphasizing problem-solving skills. They also reported a decrease in the construction and use of multiple-choice tests.

The literature clearly shows that high-stakes standardized tests do affect teachers' instructional practices. At their best—and the best so far seem to be authentic performance-based tests because of the variety and depth of instruction they promote—teachers think more about improving and experimenting with instruction to foster more critical thinking skills and student involvement. At their worst, high-stakes tests that measure discrete skills press teachers into rushing through material in a superficial manner, resorting in teacher-directed strategies and promotion of lower-level thinking skills such as rote memorization and drill-and-skill worksheet exercises. According to Smith (1991a), teachers often resort to instructional strategies such as using materials that mimic test formats and teaching students how to transfer answers to test sheets because they believe this is the only way they can exert any control over test scores, and it is the only way to reconcile conflicting demands on their own time and energy.

How has MCAS influenced the way English teachers design and implement instruction? Do teachers feel pressed for time to cover test content? Can teachers really "cover" test content when they do not know what reading passages will be on the test? Do teachers tend to forego student-centered and critical thinking activities such as library research and in-depth projects for more teacher-centered instructional practices that foster lower-level or basic skills? Are teachers in Massachusetts reacting to MCAS like
teachers in Kentucky by experimenting more with methods and emphasizing more problem-solving skills? What type of instruction are teachers abandoning because of their need to prepare students for MCAS?

Teachers’ Emotional Responses to High-Stakes Testing

Pressures

The literature generally shows that teachers working under high-stakes testing policies often suffer emotional effects. First, teachers feel a great deal of pressure from administrators, parents, and the media to improve test scores (Hall & Klein, 1992; Herman, Abedi & Golan, 1994; Koretz et al., 1996; Shannon, 1986; Shepard & Dougherty, 1991). In fact, a survey study of 413 teachers and 219 principals reveals that 44 percent of surveyed teachers felt handicapped by pressures and 69 percent said that stress was a common experience for them (Sandefur & Hinely, 1991). Teachers affected by performance-based standardized tests that include authentic assessment tasks reported similar feelings. Ninety-eight percent of the teachers in the Koretz et al. (1996) study agreed that they suffer from pressure to improve student performance on the KIRIS.

Several studies show that there is a direct relationship between the pressure teachers experience and a number of factors. Two studies (Herman & Golan; 1991; Herman, Abedi & Golan, 1994) conclude that teachers in schools with high numbers of poor students felt the most pressure to increase student scores. Lomax et al.’s (1995) study reveals that pressure related to student test performance was dependent on how heavily test scores were used for placement, promotion or graduation requirements; how much administrators emphasized the need for high test scores; and whether the tests were at passing or near passing levels. Similarly, Darling-Hammond and Wise (1985) state
that teachers’ responses depend on how constrained they believe they were to meet what they perceive are the needs of students. Pressure, likewise, depended on how flexible they thought the standards were.

Inappropriate Test Preparation and Administration Practices

Monsaas and Englehard (1994) discovered that the pressure to increase test scores had a significant effect on testing practice behaviors. Some teachers in these studies felt this pressure so strongly that they resorted to using questionable test preparation and administration practices (often called cheating practices) such as rephrasing questions on tests, providing hints, excluding certain students from taking the test, and teaching directly to a specific test (Hall & Klein, 1993; Shepard & Dougherty, 1991; Smith, 1991a). These practices result in what Mehrens and Kaminski (1988) would call polluting the effects of the test.

Hall and Klein (1992) state that teachers are often confused about what constitutes inappropriate test preparation practices, and although people in the testing community may call some of these practices (such as teaching directly to the test) cheating, many teachers would not. For example, Mehrens and Kaminski (1989) say that teaching information only because it is on a test is an inappropriate practice. Teachers in Smith’s (1991a) study had specific ideas of what constitutes cheating: giving hints, rephrasing the wording on tests, giving students more time than allowed on timed tests, providing the correct answers, and altering marks on answer sheets. Smith (1991a) concludes that the teachers’ meaning of cheating differs greatly from educators like Mehrens and Kaminski because these experts’ ideas are based on the assumption that tests adequately measure pupil achievement and school performance, and these are assumptions that teachers do
not necessarily hold. Smith states that teachers already view the whole high-stakes testing process as polluted because they see “fundamental discrepancies between true educational attainment and information converged by test score indicators” (p. 538). According to Smith, testing proponents impose their own version of reality and the testing community’s standards on school systems “without considering the differences between the two social systems” (p. 538). Therefore, Smith states, it is not accurate to say that teachers deliberately cheat or intentionally distort the results of tests.

Do Massachusetts English teachers feel pressure to increase scores, and if so, from whom do they experience this pressure? Do teachers who teach a specific population of students (for example, low ability, rural, minority, honors) experience more or less pressure than their colleagues? Is this pressure universal due to the public reporting of scores? What are the consequences of this pressure?

A recent *New York Times* article alleged that Massachusetts teachers resorted to using cheating practices in the preparation and administration of tests (Wilgoren, 2000). The question is why, and do teachers in this study consider these practices cheating? Also, proponents of high-stakes tests would say pressure is needed to produce effective educational results in the form of high test scores. What are teachers’ perceptions on how to raise standards without high-stakes testing? Are the consequences of this kind of pressure really negative, or are they ultimately positive if they lead to better teaching and increased learning?

**Issues of Low Morale**

Many studies show that high-stakes testing and accountability measures often lead to low teacher morale for a variety of reasons (Cooper & Davies, 1993; Corbett &
Wilson, 1989; Herman & Golan, 1991; Shannon, 1986; Smith, 1991a; 1991b). This is evidenced in Jones et al.’s (1999) survey study of 236 North Carolina elementary school teachers, 77 percent of whom felt that the state’s increased attention to accountability measures negatively affected their morale. Rosenholtz’s (1987) study reveals that 60 percent of the 73 elementary teachers she interviewed felt lower faculty morale due to the influence of minimum-competency testing. This phenomenon is also true of teachers in Kentucky who prepare students to take the performance-based tests with authentic assessment tasks (Koretz et al., 1996).

Low morale is often attributed to feelings of powerlessness over curriculum and instruction. Teachers feel that they do not have autonomy or control over their own classroom decisions, and this often makes them cynical about testing and reform efforts (Brown, 1992; 1993; Cooper & Davies, 1993; Rosenholtz, 1987; Smith, 1991a; Stephens et al. 1995). Teachers often look at standardized tests as an affront to their competence and professional judgment (Cooper & Davies, 1993), something Smith (1991b) says makes teaching a “deskilled” (p. 10) profession. Rosenholtz (1987) explains that intrusive managerial tasks such as time needed to acquire materials, time necessary to prepare for and administer tests, and additional paperwork adds to this diminished performance efficacy. According to Rosenholtz (19870, less autonomy, deskilling and intrusive tasks, in turn, lead to a decrease in workplace commitment.

Research also shows that low teacher morale often stems from the ways students’ test scores are reported. In her ethnographic study of two elementary schools in Phoenix, Smith (1991b) witnessed the anxiety, shame, loss of esteem, and alienation that teachers experience when test scores are published publicly. In fact, Smith calls the media’s
treatment of the test scores brutal. According to Smith, teachers feel this anxiety and pressure if their students perform well or poorly on tests. Other studies show that all of these negative feelings become exacerbated when scores are used for teacher evaluation or comparisons; when teachers believe that the application of the testing policy is inflexible; and when teachers believe they have little control over the test scores their students receive (Brown, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1985; Jones et al, 1999; Lomax et al., 1995; Smith, 1991b).

Do Massachusetts English teachers experience low morale as a result of MCAS? If so, in what ways do they experience this? Some would ask, what difference does it make how a testing program emotionally affects teachers? After all, public school teachers are state employees who are charged to teach students. Does it matter that English teachers feel committed to their work and empowered to make professional decisions if students are literate at a proficient level? In what ways might low morale affect the work of English teachers? What is gained? What is lost?

Teachers’ Thoughts and Attitudes about High-Stakes Tests

Many teachers report that standardized tests are not useful methods of educational reform, saying they don’t think tests help improve schools, and they do not help teachers clarify their goals (Herman & Golan, 1991; Herman, Golan & Dreyfus, 1990). Teachers in some reports went so far as to call them worthless (Smith, 1991b), irrelevant to what they do in the classroom, and inconsistent with the ways students learn (Cooper & Davies, 1985; Howe & Thames, 1996). Some thought testing trivialized the educational process—learning is more complicated than what test scores can show (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1985). Many teachers felt that high test scores do not necessarily
relate to good teaching, but rather reflect the students’ SES (socio-economic status) and native intellectual qualities (Herman, Golan & Dreyfus, 1990; Koretz et al., 1996; Smith, 1991b).

On the other hand, in some studies teachers said that high-stakes testing was a positive and necessary change agent and a way to raise standards and revitalize students’ skills (Howe & Thames, 1996; Koretz et al., 1996). In a study by Darling-Hammond and Wise (1985), 30 percent of the 43 elementary and secondary teachers reported that they thought high-stakes tests establish clear standards and place the onus on students. Nonetheless, some teachers in the Smith’s (1991b) study reported thinking just the opposite; many of these teachers think tests hold students accountable to standards that are impossible to meet. In addition, even though Kentucky teachers were generally supportive of the performance-based KIRIS tests, some teachers did not feel that all students could learn to the same high level of standard. Yet, they stated that reaching for a high standard of learning was the right message to send (Koretz et al., 1996).

Regarding their usefulness for curriculum and instruction, many teachers found a gap between the content on the tests and their own curriculum and pedagogical strategies (Wideen, O’Shea, & Pye, 1997). In the Herman and Golan (1991) survey study of 341 third through sixth grade teachers from nine states, teachers stated that test scores don’t provide important feedback on teaching curriculum, and the 30 teachers in Brown’s (1992) interview study stated that the tests did not reflect priorities of instruction. Teachers often report that the test scores themselves have limited value for educators. Two research studies showed that teachers thought there was a discrepancy between true educational attainment and the information that the test scores provide (Sinkule, 1996;
Smith, 1991a). In the Jones et al. (1999) study, teachers stated they had no confidence in test validity because scores do not show the interpretive context of teaching and learning.

Conversely, teachers, who work under more recent reform efforts and prepare students to take authentic performance-based tests, said these new tests were helpful in developing teaching strategies and curricula (Howe & Thames, 1996). They stated that these exams tested a wide variety of skills, and the new testing formats positively affected instruction more than traditional multiple-choice-only tests because, according to them, the test content closely resembled what teachers teach (Koretz et al, 1996).

MCAS is different from many previous standardized tests such as minimum competency tests, in that it measures learning outcomes of specific content standards, requires an element of authentic performance, and is part of a strict accountability system. Given the newness of these tests, it is important to ask teachers about their thoughts and attitudes about MCAS, especially since they are required to prepare students to take these tests. How useful do Massachusetts teachers believe MCAS tests are for educational reform? Do teachers find the tests useful in the complicated processes of teaching and learning? How confident are teachers that MCAS tests are valid predictors of what students have learned and what teachers have taught?

Building on Previous Research

The questions that flow from this review have not been answered by current research. In fact, no studies have been conducted using in-depth interviews from a phenomenological perspective on the more current testing initiatives. I believed this method would yield a more comprehensive look at how high-stakes testing affects the work of English teachers.
Few studies have been conducted on the more current, authentic performance-based, curriculum-centered tests that are part of the recent national standards movement. To date, there have been only four (Ferree, 1997; Howe & Thames, 1996; Jones et al., 1999; Koretz et al., 1996). These tests are different from traditional standardized, norm-referenced tests because, like MCAS, these new standards-based tests are connected to curriculum frameworks and require extensive writing. Nonetheless, on the continuum of authentic performance-based tests, MCAS seems to offer students only a modicum of opportunities to demonstrate performance on tasks that would be considered authentic or based on real world tasks. That is, only the open-response and long composition portions of MCAS require students to “perform.” Yet, this performance seems to be based, not on real-world tasks, but on school-world tasks.

The research on teachers’ experiences with these new authentic performance-based and curriculum-centered tests show mixed results. For example, some teachers see them as promoting effective changes in curriculum and instruction (Howe & Thames, 1996; Koretz et al., 1996), and others report that these tests restrict planning, teaching, and learning (Ferree, 1997; Jones et al., 1999). These are complicated testing systems, guided by specific philosophies about teaching and learning and by educational policies that foster tough accountability arrangements. It is essential to examine how these new testing systems and accountability policies affect the work of teachers, especially since the successful implementation of these testing policies depends on the work of teachers.

Of the 30 studies, 10 used surveys alone and 5 more used surveys in conjunction with other methods such as observations and interviews to understand teachers’ perceptions of and experiences with high-stakes tests. Surveys and questionnaires are
useful methods when one is trying to garner a broad understanding of a phenomenon. Often surveys are sent to a large sampling of teachers, and the results provide statistical information about teachers’ work experiences, attitudes and perceptions. For example, survey studies such as Herman and Golan (1991), Sandefur and Hinely (1991), and Shepard and Dougherty (1991) have presented me with a general understanding of how teachers conduct their work as teachers under the requirement of a high-stakes examination. They report information such as 38 percent of teachers reported spending less time on high order thinking skills (Sandefur & Hinely, 1991) and 68 percent of surveyed teachers conduct test preparation activities throughout the year (Shepard & Dougherty, 1991). This information is constructive, especially when little research in general has been conducted on a topic such as this. Survey research is necessarily exploratory. Researchers need to examine this phenomenon through a macro lens before looking deeper at specific populations and experiences.

The questions I pose in this review of literature required me to explore the relationship between high-stakes testing and the work of teachers in more depth, that is, through a micro lens. In order to achieve this type of depth, one either needs to spend a great deal of time in a setting with a handful of participants, that is through an ethnographic approach, or to conduct in-depth interviews. Several researchers have used ethnographic methods (Cooper & Davies, 1993; Corbett & Wilson, 1987; 1989; Ferree, 1997; Kuhs et al., 1985; Lomax et al., 1995; Shannon, 1986; Smith, 1991a; 1991b; Stephens et al., 1995; Wolf & McIver, 1997; Zancanella, 1992). These studies helped me understand how certain types of tests affect teachers. For example, in Smith’s (1991a) study she was able to observe how teachers changed their instructional practices to help
students pass their required standardized tests. Although ethnographic methods help to clarify teachers’ actions and the motives for these actions, much of the meaning of these experiences, as reported in these studies, comes from the researchers.

I was interested in the meaning that teachers make of their own experiences, which can only be learned by asking participants questions and letting their stories unfold through an interview process. With the exception of the Brown (1992; 1993), Darling-Hammond and Wise (1985), Rosenholtz (1987), and Wideen, O’Shea, and Pye (1992; 1997) studies, most research that included interviews used some type of structured interview. That is, the researchers used a specific framework of ideas about testing, teaching, and learning to guide their interviews. Structured interviews are practical when one is looking to find answers to specific questions, and they are helpful in developing consistency among answers participants may give. Yet, they inevitably limit the participants’ stories to the topics that the researcher presents. Moreover, in structured interviews, participants are not afforded the opportunity to tell their own stories unaffectedly, make connections among their experiences, or make meaning of these stories and experiences—events I believe occur naturally in an in-depth interview.

Four of the 30 studies used in-depth interviews as the sole method of inquiry, yet in each case, researchers studied the experiences of elementary school teachers (Brown, 1992; 1993; Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1985; Rosenholtz, 1987). Moreover, none of these studies used in-depth interviews from a phenomenological perspective, the method I used in this study. I will explain my methodology in more depth in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to explore what it is like to teach ninth and tenth grade English in light of the recent high-stakes testing requirement in Massachusetts using in-depth interviews from a phenomenological perspective (Seidman, 1998). The question that guided my study was “How has the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) affected the work of high school English teachers?”

This study is significant in three ways: First, I focus on a particular type of teacher—the high school English teacher—that often has been neglected in other studies. Second, I look at how these high school English teachers were influenced by a particular type of test, that is curriculum-driven, standardized tests with elements of performance assessment. Third, I use a methodology—in-depth interviews from a phenomenological perspective—that had not been used with this group of teachers and their experiences with this type of test.

Of the 30 studies I examined in my review of literature, only five studied the perceptions of secondary English language arts teachers (Cooper & Davies, 1993; Ferree, 1997; Suhor, 1985; Wolf & McIver, 1997; Zancanella, 1992). Of those five, only one concentrated on high school English teachers. The other studies focused on middle school/junior high school English teachers or English language arts curriculum coordinators. The one study on high school teachers (Cooper & Davies, 1993) was conducted with English teachers from Great Britain. My study focuses on high school English teachers in Massachusetts and their experiences with a standards-based statewide testing system.
I was interested in studying Massachusetts high school English teachers' experiences with MCAS for several reasons. First, I believed (and still do believe) that English is a complex discipline, and teachers make curricular and instructional decisions based on their philosophies about English as a discipline as well as philosophies about teaching and learning. I wanted to learn if a test that prescribes a specific philosophy about English has any influence in the way these teachers conduct their work. Second, MCAS tests in all subjects (not just English language arts) require students to produce a great deal of writing, and English teachers are responsible for teaching students how to write. I wanted to know if English teachers feel responsible for preparing students to write effectively in all subjects, and if so, how these feelings influence their work. Third, I was interested in ninth and tenth grade teachers because they are the ones who are directly responsible for preparing grade 10 students to pass MCAS with a score sufficient enough to qualify for graduation. Starting this year, Massachusetts tenth graders will be the only group of students who will be penalized if they do not score at the appropriate level; that is, students in grades 4 and 8 are not penalized as such.

This chapter outlines the details of my research design: theoretical perspectives; personal research perspectives; data gathering methods; selection of participants; methods for making contact; ethical considerations; data analysis; and the trustworthiness of the study. These details not only relate the practical considerations of developing a research design, but also explain some of the theoretical underpinnings of my decisions.

Theoretical Perspectives

The theories that guided my study are grounded first in the qualitative paradigm. I was not looking for a universal truth, a single view of reality, or a cause-effect
relationship (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Exploring the “lived experience” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10) of everyday English teachers, working in everyday schools with everyday students is decidedly qualitative. My study did not yield data that lead to one generalized idea of what it is like to teach high school English under a policy that requires students to take high-stakes tests. Rather, it led to multiple realities and multiple ways that English teachers make sense of the work they do under the state-mandated MCAS.

Embedded in this qualitative paradigm is interviewing as a research method, which was the qualitative method that I adopted in this study. Although there are many types of qualitative interviewing methods, I chose in-depth interviews from a phenomenological perspective (Seidman, 1998). This method is most consistent with my belief that the most effective way to investigate and analyze my topic is to gather data directly from my participants about their perceived experiences as it is related to me through in-depth interviews.

As I explain below, part of my methodology deliberately requires participants to reconstruct their life histories and experiences to discover from them those things that are not directly observable such as feelings, thoughts, and intentions (Patton, 1990). Through these interviews, I asked participants to tell stories within contexts that were both social and biographical (Bogdan & Bilken, 1992; Mishler, 1986). Also, these contexts generated rich, thick descriptions in the participants’ own words so that I, as the researcher, was able to develop a holistic theory of a phenomenon—in this case, the phenomenon of teaching English under the requirement of the MCAS tests (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).
Much of the theory that guided my approach to interviewing is rooted in phenomenology (Holstein & Gubrin, 1994; Moustakas, 1994; Schutz, 1967; Seidman, 1998). In particular, I was guided by Alfred Schutz’s (1967) ideas about the limitations of understanding others, that is, the experience of others and the meanings they make of those experiences. Schutz states that it is impossible to completely understand another person because we cannot enter another person’s stream of consciousness and fully experience the same experience. According to Schutz, even though we are bound by the limitations of our individual humanness, it is important to try to understand another person by observing his or her actions. However, that understanding is always incomplete and could possibly be erroneous. Schutz explains that an outside observer may misinterpret the intentions or meanings of those actions. The closest we can get to understanding another person’s “subjective experience” is by asking that person what his or her experiences are and what they mean. This allows the person to interpret his or her life world. It is clear when one understands and subscribes to Schutz’s theory that if, as a researcher, I wanted to understand the experiences of another person—such as an English teacher—I would not have relied on observations or documents for that information. Rather, I would have used some type of qualitative interview to gather my data.

**Personal Perspective**

Marshall and Rossman (1999) recommend that researchers who undertake a phenomenological interview study develop what they call an “epoche” (p. 113). This *epoche* is a full description of the researcher’s own experience with the phenomenon to be studied, in this case teaching English and high-stakes standardized testing. Marshall and Rossman state that this step is essential for the researcher “to gain clarity from her
own preconceptions” (p. 113). Therefore, I highlight below how I came to this topic and how this phenomenon has affected me personally prior to this study. I mean to “make clear” my subjective experiences.

I came to this research study serendipitously. In partial fulfillment of my doctoral program, I completed a pilot study for my comprehensive examinations on novice secondary English teachers’ experiences of teaching writing in urban settings (Turner, 1999). Through a three-interview series of in-depth interviews from a phenomenological perspective (Seidman, 1998) with two participants, I discovered in the data something I had not anticipated. In recounting their experiences of teaching writing to urban students, these teachers felt that the recent push for high academic standards measured by MCAS was not an imposition, but rather a positive experience. That is, one participant felt these recent requirements could be folded easily into her curriculum and instruction, and the other felt that these higher standards and the weight of the tests were a positive influence on her curriculum, instruction, and students. These findings surprised me in light of what I had read and heard in the media regarding teachers’ denouncements of MCAS. The findings made me wonder if other teachers had positive experiences related to MCAS tests. In turn, this wondering led me to ask, “How are English teachers experiencing their work in light of this high-stakes requirement? How has MCAS affected, if at all, their work?”

As I became committed to this topic, I explored my own experiences with standardized testing and with teaching. Throughout my lifetime as a student, I have attained only mediocre scores on standardized tests. Yet, when I applied myself, I was able to attain high grades and substantive praises from my teachers, instructors and
professors. Despite my relative success as a student, I approached each required testing situation (such as the SAT and GRE tests) with trepidation, fearing that someone—a college admissions board, a graduate studies program—would brand me as simply average, or worse, below average and close the proverbial gate, barring me from entrance into some coveted academic arena. Fortunately, my grades and other, more qualitative, anecdotal evidence became my “foot in the door,” allowing me to prove myself worthy of a place at the academic table.

I also began to reflect on my experiences as an English teacher for eight years in an all-women’s Catholic high school, a school whose mission is to educate the whole person, not just the academic person. Approximately 90 percent of the students who attend this school are Latinas, whose first language is not English. Yet, as middle and upper-middle class students, they enjoy all the privileges afforded a person in this society. These students never have to worry about passing a required standardized test in order to receive their diplomas. What this means for teachers is that they do not have to adjust their curricula to prepare students to take a test, and are free to focus on planning curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of their students. I know that despite all of these privileges and opportunities, if these students were required to pass a series of standardized tests in order to receive their diplomas, they and their teachers would be affected by this experience in some manner, to some degree. These teachers and students would not be exempt from the impact simply because they are socio-economically and academically well off. I entered into this research with a negative bias, a presumption that all students and teachers, regardless of their social class or type of school in which they work, are affected negatively by standardized tests that have severe consequences.
When conducting a qualitative research study, the researcher needs to understand that she is the primary instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As a human instrument, I relied a great deal on tacit knowledge. Yet, this tacit knowledge was influenced by my experiences as both a student who feared standardized tests and as a teacher who never really had to deal with them on any significant level. I was aware that these experiences could influence my work as a researcher, and I made a concerted effort to pay special attention to the possible biases I may have had in the process of conducting interviews as well as in the process of analyzing and interpreting data.

One way in which I tried to check my biases was to elicit the help of a peer debriefer who, during my data gathering phase, listened to my concerns, examined with me my interview guide and selected transcripts, and asked probing questions about the interview process. Moreover, I obtained the help of two peer debriefers as I analyzed my data. At times these peer debriefers were sounding boards for my own thinking. At times they pushed my thinking into deeper territories. At times they offered feedback and concrete advice. It was essential for the integrity of this study that I maintain an awareness of my subjective experiences and perceptions and that I continually checked for biases.

**Data Gathering Methods**

**Rationale for In-Depth Interviews from a Phenomenological Perspective.**

I have already explained at length why I chose interviewing as my methodology and how Schutz’s (1967) theory of phenomenology grounded my research design. The questions I now have to answer are “Why in-depth interviewing?” and “What will this in-depth interviewing look like?” There are many types of interviews from which a
researcher can choose (Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 1996), but all interviews are not equal. Some interviews are highly structured where the interviewer defines the problem in advance and formulates a specific list of questions to be covered. Some interviews are unstructured where the researcher does not seek normative responses, but rather privileges the participant’s definitions of the situation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Not all interviews establish context, which is essential for participants to make meaning of their experiences (Mishler, 1986). Therefore, I chose interviewing as a research method that was designed to establish context. Establishing context though interviewing required time—time necessary for the participant to reflect on his or her experiences. The method I selected provided the participants a significant amount of time (approximately four and a half hours) to develop context and making meaning.

I followed an approach to in-depth interviewing described by Seidman (1998). This approach was structured in a way that allowed participants (a) to establish context through a life history perspective, (b) to reflect on their current experiences, and (c) to make meaning of these experiences. Through a series of three separate 90-minute interviews, participants received the time essential to reflect deeply and seriously on their experiences and the meanings they made of these experiences.

In-depth Interviews from a Phenomenological Perspective Design

In the summer of 1999, I conducted a small pilot study with one participant to investigate the worth of this project. Using the methods I explain below, I interviewed a ninth grade English teacher who worked in an affluent suburban school. Knowing that I only had time to interview one participant for this pilot study, I deliberately chose a teacher from a suburban high school. My reasoning was that the students from this
particular school district had performed well on the first round of MCAS tests. Therefore, I assumed that the teachers in this school would feel less pressure to help their students perform well than teachers in lower performing schools. My logic was that if my data revealed that this teacher, who worked with students who performed well on MCAS, experienced some effects from MCAS, then teachers from underperforming districts would experience even greater effects. The data revealed that this teacher had many experiences related to MCAS, and this data helped to refine my in-depth interview design.

As stated above, I conducted three, 90-minute interviews with individual ninth and tenth grade English teachers. (For complete explanation of my criteria for selection of participants, please see below.) I carried out each interview approximately one week apart in order to allow the participants time “to mull over the preceding interview but not enough time to lose the connection between the two” (Seidman, 1998, p. 14). I tape recorded each interview.

Each interview served a particular function. The first interview was grounded in life history interviewing, and its purpose was to place the participant’s current experience within the context of his or her early life experiences. For this interview, I asked each participant to reconstruct experiences that pertained directly to education, literacy, teaching English and standardized tests. Some general questions (or probes) that guided this interview are as follows: Tell me as much about your life as possible up to the time you became an English teacher. What is your personal history with literacy, school, and standardized tests? How did you become a high school English teacher? What was it like to teach English before the Massachusetts Department of Education implemented its
current educational reform efforts? How did you plan and teach language, literature, and writing, and what philosophies guided your pedagogical decisions? What was your work environment like before the MCAS requirement? This interview was a review of the participant’s life history as it pertained to teaching English up to the time he or she had to teach under the current testing policy.

The second interview required each participant to reconstruct the details of his or her current experience. In this case, I asked teachers to talk about what it was like currently to teach English. I asked teachers to tell stories and reconstruct specific events. Some general questions (or probes) that guided my second interview are as follows: Tell me what it is like to teach English in light of the MCAS requirement. How do you teach literature, writing, and language in the context of MCAS? How consistent is the content of the tenth grade MCAS test with your philosophies about teaching reading, literature, writing, and language? In what ways, if at all, have you had to make curricular adjustments to help students prepare for MCAS? If you do shift your curricula to match test content, what content is gained or lost in shifting the curriculum? Have your instructional strategies changed as a result of MCAS? If so, in what ways? What is your morale as a result of MCAS testing? In what ways does this morale affect your work as an English teacher? In what ways do you currently evaluate students? What is your work environment like now?

The purpose of the final interview was to allow participants time to reflect on the meaning they make of their experiences. Seidman (1998) explains this as follows: “Making sense or making meaning requires that the participants look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation. It also requires that they
look at their present experience in detail within the context in which it occurs” (p. 12). In this interview, participants made connections between their early and current teaching experiences and early and current experiences with high-stakes testing. Some of the general questions that guided this interview are as follows: What does it mean for you to teach ninth or tenth grade English in light of Massachusetts education reform and MCAS? What meaning do you place on the role of evaluation in teaching? What does this high-stakes testing mean to you? How useful do you believe MCAS tests are for educational reform? How confident are you that MCAS tests are valid predictors of what students have learned and what teachers have taught? Given what you said in interviews one and two, how do you make sense of your work? This was the most challenging of the three interviews because it required the participant to make intellectual and emotional connections between his or her work and life.

Selection of Participants, Making Contact, and Ethical Considerations

Selecting Participants

When it comes to sampling, there is a big difference between the sampling strategies of quantitative and qualitative researchers. In the positivist paradigm, the researcher typically aims for a random or statistically representative sampling of participants in order to form generalizations from the sample to a larger population (Patton, 1990). A qualitative researcher has a completely different goal in mind when establishing sampling criteria. Patton (1990) explains that in qualitative research the logic and power lies in selecting “information-rich cases for in-depth study” (p. 169). The idea is that the researcher can learn a great deal about a topic by going deep, not broad. Patton (1990) calls this “purposeful sampling” (p. 169), which requires the
researcher to establish boundaries or a framework for one’s study. The strategy that I employed for purposeful sampling of my participants is Patton’s (1990) “maximum variation sampling” (p. 172), the goal of which is to allow the researcher to look for variations and patterns among a particular population, in this case Massachusetts secondary English teachers. I designed my sampling method to ensure that my chosen participants reflected the best range possible of English teachers so that others experiencing this phenomenon would be able to connect to the experiences of those included in my study. Table 1 illustrates the variation among my 16 participants. I have included information in Table 1 regarding the participants’ age, post-secondary education, type of school in which he or she works, the grades and courses each participant teaches, basic school demographics, and number of years each participant has been teaching. To protect my participants, I used pseudonyms that teachers selected for themselves, or that I selected for them in the event they did not choose a pseudonym.

In Massachusetts, fourth, eighth and tenth grade public school students are required to take the MCAS tests in a variety of subjects. Although I could have interviewed fourth and eighth grade English language arts teachers, I deliberately limited this study to ninth and tenth grade teachers because their students are the only ones who will take the MCAS test with any serious academic consequences. As of this year, MCAS will be the sole determinant for high school graduation. I made my selection based on the assumption that if there were any pressures to be felt about preparing students to take the MCAS tests, the high school teachers would experience this pressure more readily since their students’ futures are more immediately at stake.
Table 1. Overview of Participants’ Background Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Post-secondary Education</th>
<th>Type of School</th>
<th>Grades and Courses Currently Teaches</th>
<th>School Demographics</th>
<th>Yr. Tchr.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>B.A in Communications; B.A. in English; M.Ed. in Education</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>9th &amp; 10th English (lower level); 10th American Literature</td>
<td>Middle class; primarily white students</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>B.A. in English; M.Ed. in Education; Currently in Ed.D. program</td>
<td>Rural/Vocational</td>
<td>9th through 12th English (Heterogeneous classes)</td>
<td>Lower class; primarily white students</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>B.A. in English; M.A. in English</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>9th &amp; 10th English (Heterogeneous classes)</td>
<td>Lower class; primarily Latino and African-American students</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>B.A. in English; M.Ed. in Education; Currently in Ed.D. program</td>
<td>Urban/Vocational</td>
<td>9th &amp; 12th English (Heterogeneous classes)</td>
<td>Lower class; primarily Latino students</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>B.A. in English; M.Ed. in Education Currently in Ed.D. program</td>
<td>Rural/Regional</td>
<td>10th English (Heterogeneous classes)</td>
<td>Working and middle class; primarily white students</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>B.A. in English M.A. in English</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>10th &amp; 12th English (Honors and College Prep)</td>
<td>Middle class; primarily white students</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>B.A. in Communications and Education</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>9th &amp; 10th English; College Writing</td>
<td>Lower class; primarily Latino and African-American students</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>B.A. in English M.Ed. in Education (administration)</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>9th through 12th writing and literature courses</td>
<td>Lower and middle class; primarily white students</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>B.A. in English; M.Ed. in Education; M.Ed. in School Counseling</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Transitional English; 12th English (Honors)</td>
<td>Lower class; a mixture of white and Latino students</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>B.A. in English</td>
<td>Alternative / Urban</td>
<td>9th through 12th English (Heterogeneous classes)</td>
<td>Lower class; primarily Latino and African-American students</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tricia</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>B.A. in English; Currently enrolled in an M.Ed. program</td>
<td>Urban/Vocational</td>
<td>9th through 12th English; Writing</td>
<td>Lower class; primarily Latino and African-American students</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gary</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>B.A. in English M.Ed. in Education</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>9th English (Heterogeneous class); Journalism; 12th AP</td>
<td>Working and middle class; primarily white students</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramon</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>B.A. in Comparative Literature and Spanish; M.A. in Spanish; Ph.D.</td>
<td>Charter</td>
<td>10th English (Heterogeneous classes)</td>
<td>Working and middle class; primarily white students</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>B.A. in English M.Ed. in Education</td>
<td>Rural/Vocational</td>
<td>9th through 12th English (Heterogeneous classes)</td>
<td>Lower class; primarily white students</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>B.A. in English M.Ed. in Education</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>10th Honors English; 10th Lower English, 11th English</td>
<td>Middle to upper class; primarily white students</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>B.A. in English M.Ed. in Education</td>
<td>Rural/Regional</td>
<td>9th English; 10th American Literature; 11th and 12th English</td>
<td>Working and middle class; primarily white students</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I was interested in interviewing participants from a variety of rural, suburban, and urban settings to determine to what extent the experiences of teachers from various settings and sites were connected or divergent. Three participants taught in rural/regional high schools; three taught in urban high schools; and, four taught in suburban high schools. In addition, I wanted to select participants from other types of Massachusetts public schools in order to understand the experiences that may be specific to teachers in those settings. Therefore, I interviewed two teachers from an urban vocational school, two from a rural vocational school, one from an urban alternative high school, and one from a charter school.

I deliberately selected ninth and tenth grade teachers who taught a variety of courses and types of students: honors, regular, basic, special education, and ESL/bilingual students. Again, my reasoning was that I wanted to determine if participants had experiences specific to the type of students they teach. As Table 1 shows, the teachers taught a range of courses and levels of students. Some taught primarily honors or “lower level” students, while others worked with classes that were heterogeneously mixed. Some taught typical English courses (ninth grade English), while others taught Transitional English, College Writing, or Journalism I in addition to teaching ninth and/or tenth grade English.

I also attempted to contrast my participant pool according to gender, race, culture, ethnicity and social class to include as much variety in my participants’ voices. I wanted a fairly even number of male and female participants; therefore, my final sampling included seven women and nine men. I attempted to find English teachers who came from a variety of racial, ethnic, and social backgrounds. However, as my experience of
working with English teachers from a variety of sites and settings in Western Massachusetts informed me, most secondary English teachers are White, middle class with English as their first language and whose backgrounds are distinctively Western. My sampling represents this state of racial, cultural, ethnic, and class structure among high school English teachers in Western Massachusetts. Only one participant was of Latino descent, and he was the only participant who spoke another language fluently. One participant was Jewish, while the rest of the participants tended to be Christian. Finally, all participants were middle class.

I decided to limit my selection to participants who had a minimum of three years of teaching experience. My reasoning was that these teachers would have had some teaching experience prior to the implementation of MCAS and the Massachusetts Board of Education’s decision to attach high-stakes requirements to MCAS. I believed that those who have taught for a number of years before the state’s testing policy would best be able to explain its impact on the work of high school English teachers.

My participants reflected a range of teaching experience. For example, two participants had taught only three years, while on the opposite end of the continuum, five teachers had been teaching for over 25 years in secondary schools. Many participants had taught and/or continue to teach in non-secondary education settings. For example, four participants had experience teaching post-secondary students, one had taught in a prison setting, and one taught in an international summer program for youth. Furthermore, the teachers’ own post-secondary education varied slightly. All but one had an English or literature bachelor’s degree, 14 out of 16 had or were currently completing a master’s degree, and four either had or were currently working on a doctoral degree.
I took a theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) approach to determining when to complete my interviewing process. This means that I was open to making decisions about data collection based on several factors: my experiences with the participants, on-going preliminary analysis, and until I felt no new significant information would be gleaned from newly sampled participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Making Contact

I had little difficulty gaining access to and making contact with my participants. I gained access primarily through professional connections I had made with various Massachusetts high school English teachers when I had been a university supervisor of student teachers. These were classroom teachers with whom I did not work directly, nor did I have a personal or social relationship with them. Once I made these initial contacts via telephone or electronic mail, I used a “snowballing” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p 233) technique to build a participant pool, asking those who were willing (as well as those who were unwilling) to take part in my study if they could refer me to other teachers that might be willing and able to participate. I then contacted these potential participants, determined if they would be appropriate participants for my study, and invited them to participate.

Most of my initial contacts were held over the phone or by email, at which time the participants and I set a time for a personal contact visit. During these crucial contact visits, usually held at the teachers’ schools, I elaborated on the purpose of my study and what participation in my study might mean. I also answered any questions they had. If possible, at that time I presented teachers with a participant information form (see
Appendix B) and my informed consent form (see Appendix C). If not, I went over these forms at the time of our first interview.

**Ethical Considerations**

In-depth interviewing from a phenomenological perspective is a method that yields rich data about participants’ experiences. Because these interviews were designed to help participants explore their life histories, experiences, and the meaning they make of these experiences, respondents shared details—often private and sensitive—about their work and home lives. These disclosures developed from a deep trust and respect for both the researcher and the interview method, something Seidman (1998) calls “interviewing as a relationship” (pp. 79-95). In a sense, this trust was what made the research process possible. In interviews I had conducted in the past, participants shared stories about eating disorders, divorces, depression, alcoholism, child-rearing difficulties, conflicts with colleagues and administrators, and notions about quitting teaching. These were subjects they may never have discussed in casual or professional conversations. Consequently, these types of stories can leave participants vulnerable in ways that neither the participant nor I can imagine during the course of the interview. Therefore, it was essential that I take great care to protect my participants.

I began my attempt at protecting my participants by constructing an informed consent form for my in-depth interviews. This form included a brief description of who I am, how the interviews would be conducted, how I would attempt to protect their identity, how I would use this information, what would happen if the participant decided to withdraw from the study, and how the participant could expect to be rewarded for his or her participation (see Appendix C). Before I conducted the interviews, I presented the
participants with the informed consent form and spoke to them about their rights as
human subjects and my responsibilities to protect them against anything that could leave
them vulnerable for having participated in this study. I also provided the participants
with a copy of this form that they could keep for their records.

In addition to the informed consent form, I took great care to manage the
information forms, interview tapes, transcripts, notes, informed consent forms, and any
other material that could have identified the participants. I used initials when labeling my
tapes, and I coded the interview transcripts using pseudonyms for the participants and the
schools at which they worked. In addition, I stored the tapes, transcripts, and other
materials in a private location to minimize the potential of anyone inadvertently
recognizing the participants. Since I sought assistance in transcribing my data, I required
that the transcriber keep all information confidential in order to protect my participants.
Moreover, I provided the transcriber with explicit instructions on how to manage the
tapes. After the tapes were transcribed, I collected the transcripts, the computer disks,
and the tapes from the transcriber.

Transforming Data: Analysis and Interpretation

Daniel Bertaux (1981) offers a comprehensive explanation of the purpose, the
process and the importance of transforming (Wolcott, 1994) or analyzing our data. He
writes as follows:

People learn through practice, and seldom does their practice put them into
contact with a wide variety of social areas. It is our task as intellectuals to
put together those bits of knowledge that may be found everywhere…and
to draw a picture of the whole and its movements. (p. 40)

Bertaux clearly states that, as researchers, our job affords us the opportunity to gather
various pieces of information, make sense of them, find patterns and relationships, and
create a holistic explanation of a phenomenon. To do this, Bertaux states, is an intellectual activity that is both a privilege and a responsibility that comes with being a social science researcher. Bertaux’s framework inspired me to approach this phase of my research project with thoughtfulness and deliberation.

As stated above, I believe that my analysis—what I refer to as preliminary analysis—began as I collected my data. What I mean by this is that I came to this research project as an informed researcher, someone who has read extensively about the field of teaching English and the topic of high-stakes testing. This knowledge provided me with some idea of possible categories. In addition, I had listened to the interview tapes several times and/or read over my interview notes as I prepared for the second and third interviews with my participants. Nonetheless, I followed Seidman’s (1998) advice to suspend in-depth analysis until all interview data had been transcribed in order to approach the data as a whole with an open mind to a wide variety of possibilities.

Once I had all the transcripts in front of me, I approached my admittedly subjective analysis of the data inductively (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I read and re-read the transcripts, first to become reacquainted with my participants and then to mark intuitively what was generally interesting. Next, I approached the task of reducing the data. Using the process of successive readings, I marked items that were most compelling. I paid attention to the stories that my participants told, and it was at this point when I paid particular attention to narrative structures and the voice of my participants (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Mishler, 1985; Seidman, 1998). For example, I noted how my participants became excited in telling stories about teaching a favorite novel or how they developed an effective assessment
rubric. I paid attention to changes in emotion or tone of voice, particularly when they talked about how they and their students were affected by MCAS. Because I learn by writing, I also wrote summaries of what the participants were saying.

To garner a close-up of each participant, I first created biographical charts. Then, I developed profiles of some participants and smaller versions of profiles called vignettes. Profiles are narratives in the participant's own words. They are the participants' stories that have a beginning, middle and an end, and are complete with conflict and resolution. Seidman (1998) believes that a profile, told in the words of the participant, is most consistent with the process of interviewing. The profile places the participant's experiences in the social and organizational context, and the participant's words "reflect the person's consciousness" (p. 102). Creating profiles necessitated that I edit the transcripts for conciseness. In order to maximize readability, I edited the participant's language of characteristics of oral language such as "ums" and "ahs" and repeated words or phrases, using ellipses to denote parts of the transcript that had been edited. Profiles I created at the end of the analysis process are included in Appendix D.

I then began to explore essential features, relationships, and patterns (Wolcott, 1994). This phase of my analysis was grounded in what Glaser and Strauss (1967) call constant comparison analysis. In this process, I paid attention to categories that began to emerge. I coded the transcripts, and I made lists of these codes, looking for patterns. One of the most effective methods of discovering the salient themes was cutting and pasting chunks of coded data into category files. As certain files grew, I was able to see what issues were most salient to my participants. Out of these files emerged themes such as "teacher identity," "MCAS as a valid predictor of teaching and learning," "how
teachers define English,” and “the limitations of MCAS.” These themes, like others, were subsumed by other themes. Periodically, I stopped and wrote memos in my reflexive journal to check my understandings, examine my biases, and pose questions. At various junctures in this process, I consulted a peer debriefer—sharing portions of my writing and mid-process analyses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

One of the things that helped me understand the global picture of what my participants were saying in relation to particular themes was crafting graphic representations of my major themes. For example, I knew that MCAS had an effect on my participants’ professional identity in ways that both empowered and disempowered these teachers. I struggled to understand this contradiction: How MCAS both empower and disempower teachers? To assist my thinking, I created a flow chart to see how the test, the educational policies, the type of students participants taught disempowered and empowered teachers, and what the consequences of that would look like. My analysis process by no means was a linear one. Rather, I recursively moved from transcripts to memos to charts to files to graphic representations to notes to peer debriefers, and wound around again, all in an effort to make sense of and be true to my participants’ experiences. The results are a fusion of my participants’ and my own meanings.

Once I had my major themes, I needed to weave them together to create a whole picture of the phenomenon. This was part of the process that Wolcott (1994) calls interpretation. I asked myself, “What sense do I make of all this? What have I learned about teaching English in light of high-stakes testing?” I then wrote my interpretations in a way that extended beyond the boundaries of this study. Among other things, I asked myself, “What are the implications of my research for the work of English teachers?
What are the implications for high-stakes testing?” Finally, I asked myself, “What has this research experience been like? What does it mean to me?”

**Trustworthiness**

Because I did not conduct a positivist study where I tried to confirm or prove some event or one truth or one reality, the notion of validity was not applicable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). At the same time, it was important that my readers be confident of my results and the study in general. In qualitative research, the worth of a study is not judged on criteria of validity and reliability. Instead, these researchers use terms such as **credibility, dependability, transferability**, and **confirmability** to create trustworthiness of their study. Developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), these are the criteria that I used to develop trustworthiness for my study.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) discuss how **prolonged engagement** in a field can make the study more trustworthy. My method of research did not lend itself to prolonged engagement in the sense of a lengthy ethnographic study. However, the series of three interviews—for a total of four and a half hours over a period of time—as opposed to a one-shot interview helped enhance the validity of my study. First, the initial interview helped establish validity by placing my participants’ words and ideas in context of their life and personal histories. Second, by conducting the interviews over a three or four week time period, I was able to account for idiosyncrasies that may have been part of one interview. Finally, the timing of interviews allowed me to check for internal consistency among the three interviews. After listening to the tapes between interviews, I was able to question my participants about things that seemed contradictory in their statements. For example, at one point in the second interview, one participant had talked about how he
felt safe from state sanctions, only to state later on that he felt unsafe. I was able to explore this contradiction with the participant in the final interview.

In addition to developing validity and internal consistency through my chosen method, I enhanced the trustworthiness of my study by seeking the help of two peer debriefers who read pieces of my transcripts and discussed with me my analyses and results. Furthermore, I kept a reflexive journal to note my questions, concerns, biases, affirmations, frustrations, and preliminary theories.

The four chapters that follow are the fruit of my research, analysis, and interpretation processes. In Chapters Four, Five, and Six, I present my findings according to my major themes: The Impact of MCAS on the Practice of Teachers of English; The Impact of MCAS on Teachers’ Professional Identities; and Teachers’ Socio-Political Analysis of the Theories that Guide Standards-base Reform, the Motives Behind MCAS, and the Current State of Education. In Chapter Seven, I present a discussion of my findings and what I believe are implications for policymakers, politicians, teachers, teacher educators, and researchers. I end Chapter Seven with some final conclusions. Finally, I present a reflection of my experiences in conducting this study in Appendix E.
CHAPTER 4

THE IMPACT OF MCAS ON THE PRACTICE OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

Introduction

The 16 participants I interviewed taught a wide range of students ("regular", honors, special education, and second language learners) from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. They worked in urban, suburban, and rural, vocational, charter, and alternative schools. Six had had been teaching over 25 years and were looking forward to retirement, while two had been teaching for only three years. Ten of the 16 participants went through traditional college/university teacher education programs, while five received their teaching certificate through alternative routes, and one had no formal training in secondary teacher education. Fourteen held graduate degrees in English or education, three were currently enrolled in doctoral programs in education, and one had a Ph.D. in Arts and Sciences. The one thing all teachers had in common was that they taught ninth and/or tenth grade English in Massachusetts public high schools.

Throughout the interviews, I wondered if it were possible—given their range of backgrounds, schools, education and practice—to make connections among these participants' experiences in teaching English under a high-stakes testing policy. As I began to work with the data and make sense of their experiences, I realized that indeed there were connections among them. By using the word connections, I do not mean to imply that there was unanimous consensus. Rather, in the process of analyzing my data, I extracted various themes. The following three chapters represent the results of my analysis, as I present in each chapter the detailed findings related to three major themes.

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found in my data. In this chapter, I begin with the theme of practice: How did these 16 participants experience the impact of MCAS on their practice?

Teachers’ Analysis of the Tenth Grade English Language Arts MCAS Test

In response to questions on their experiences with the MCAS test, these 16 teachers described their analysis and critique of the test. I begin by presenting the teachers’ analysis and critique because the way in which teachers analyzed the tenth grade English Language Arts MCAS test informed how they prepared their students to take the test. What type of test did these participants believe MCAS to be? What content and skills did teachers feel that MCAS emphasized? What were teachers’ criticisms of the test? In what ways did they approve of MCAS?

Description of the Test: Content and Skills

While some teachers were more methodical than others, each teacher analyzed the test and/or the test results data that the Commonwealth provided each district. The participants determined that the content of the tenth grade portion of the English Language Arts MCAS test covers three major areas of a high school curriculum: literature, language, and composition. Teachers concluded that the literature skills tested on MCAS require students to “read closely,” “analyze literature,” pick out “vocabulary in context,” “find the origin of a word,” identify the “parts of speech,” “construct a solid paragraph using a topic sentence,” and write “the five paragraph essay.” Further, the teachers stated that MCAS does not survey “a specific body of literature,” but students should be able to demonstrate comprehension of both fiction and non-fiction. Moreover, 13 out of 16 participants concluded that understanding “imagery,” “elements of poetry,” “literary terms,” and “artistic devices” are essential skills that students must demonstrate.

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8 The words I offset in quotations are the exact words my participants stated.
on MCAS. As Ramón stated, “You see literary analysis reduced to a description of what is there, or an application of critical terms about what is there.” In their interviews, the participants listed examples of these devices: alliteration, hyperbole, metaphor, onomatopoeia, personification, simile, and symbolism.

All but one participant either stated or alluded to the idea that students were to write a coherent, organized paragraph with a topic sentence for the open response questions, and an organized five paragraph literary analysis essay for the long composition. These teachers also stated that the long composition should be “organized” and that students need to “back up” or “give evidence” of their statements or ideas.

Two teachers discussed the type of language skills that MCAS tested. Ben talked about grammatical concepts found on MCAS, and he concluded that the language questions focus on determining parts of speech:

They throw a grammar question in [such as], “The first sentence in the paragraph says, ‘Sally, do you sometimes wish you didn’t have to go home?’ The function of the comma after Sally is to punctuate a noun in apposition, a noun of direct address, an interrupting expression, [or] an introductory clause?”... Most adults wouldn’t get that....[Students] have a wonderful piece of literature...to respond to, and then you get a question like, “In line 5 of the poem, the poem’s inventive word of wirery serves as an adjective modifying satchel, an appositive...”...They are asking the kid what part of speech a made up word is.

Ethan described the type of vocabulary skills MCAS requires: “They had one or two [questions on] trying to find an origin of a word in the dictionary....You had to follow the carets down [the passage] and see where the origin was. It was just a weird question.”

The teachers’ analysis illustrates that they view MCAS as a technical test, which has implications for their practice.
Teachers’ Criticisms of MCAS

Teachers’ concerns about level of reading passages and questions. Ten participants expressed concern about the reading level at which passages and questions were set. These teachers stated that the reading passages were “elitist,” “pitched at a high level,” “pretentious and picayune,” and “similar to [the] AP [test].” They questioned the use of passages by authors such as Thomas Wolfe, Jack London, Mary Chestnut, and Flannery O’Connor. Gary reiterated the sentiment that the reading passages were difficult:

The passages they were tested on were passages like from Thomas Wolfe, which I never read until grad school, and this was a passage for every single tenth grade kid....[A] tenth grade English teacher would not use those passages....[One passage was from] Anthony and Cleopatra, [and] for a Shakespeare play, that’s very difficult...to get through, and they could have used something else besides that....So, I think the passage part is unfair on the MCAS.

Gary and Rich repeatedly questioned why the test developers deliberately chose passages that are not part of the typical high school curriculum.

I still think that they should give passages based on what the majority of ninth and tenth graders are reading across the country because we all pretty much read the same [literature, such as]...To Kill a Mockingbird, [and] A Separate Peace....I think also the kids in Massachusetts read...Romeo and Juliet in ninth and Julius Caesar in tenth [grades]. (Gary)

The Shakespeare [passage on MCAS] is...real hard. If it were a play that maybe [students] were familiar with already...[such as] Midsummer Night’s Dream or Julius Caesar, which are standard tenth grade plays, or Romeo and Juliet, which is a ninth grade play,...that would be nice. Give them something that they are already somewhat familiar with. (Rich)

The test developers’ response to Gary and Rich’s comments is that they are careful not to select reading passages that are commonly taught in high schools because the test
developers do not want to give any student an advantage over any other student (Roach, Interview, August, 24, 1999).

In addition to the inappropriateness of the reading passages, eight teachers stated that the questions students were expected to answer about the passages were either “tricky,” “confusing,” or “difficult.” For example, Anne expressed frustration over an MCAS question about second person point of view:

I remember being frustrated [when the test] asked a question about point of view....Anyone who teaches English knows that you teach first person and third person [point of view]. And, they gave a question, and the answer was second person point of view, and I was furious....Most books don’t even discuss second person point of view. So, I showed the question...to two English professors, who, thank God, answered it wrong....Neither one of them gave second person point of view, and that kind of question infuriated me because that wasn’t about basic knowledge or understanding. That was to trick people, and I think the answer was even debatable.

Ben, likewise, discussed an MCAS question that asked students to identify an epithet, a term so seldom used that he had to look it up himself. Moreover, according to teachers like Tom, test questions sometimes exceeded information presented in the reading passages:

...a couple years ago they asked kids to make interpretations of Mary Chestnut’s diaries. She was in Charleston, South Carolina when Fort Sumter was fired on. She was an upper class Southern woman. They gave a very short excerpt from her diary, and the kids were meant to make all these inferences, some of them very complicated...[such as] “What class was this woman in?” My kids don’t even know what class is about....They think everybody is the same class....So, here is the MCAS asking them to understand the class status of Mary Chestnut in pre-Civil War South. Then, they ask inferential geography questions. [For instance,] the only thing mentioned is...the city of Charleston [and] Fort Sumter, [and] the kids are meant to know the answer to this question. “Does this entry take place in Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, New York, none of the above?” It is none of the above....It isn’t...[based on] your [reading] ability. You have to know where Charleston is? I guess that’s it—[a] geography question was on the English test.
In addition, teachers, who taught disadvantaged students such as SPED and second language learners, and/or poor inner city students, told stories about how their students had difficulty even understanding the test directions or the vocabulary used in the questions on MCAS. For example, Sydney told a story about how her students had no chance getting a correct answer because they did not understand one pivotal word:

"[When I was teaching 8th grade], there was...a question about *immunization*....The whole question was based on that one word....[The students] didn’t know the word,...and we couldn’t tell them....That...was tragic; it was heartbreaking....If the kids just knew what was being asked of them, they might’ve given it a little bit more of an effort.” Ben told a similar story:

The other thing that MCAS asked kids to do is go back into what they had read and pick out evidence of imagery or [other literary terms]....The first year they asked, “Give evidence from the *excerpt*,” and the kids...didn’t know what the word *excerpt* [meant]....When I asked native Spanish speakers, [who are] college educated...[and who] teach in this school...what the word for *excerpt* was in Spanish,...they [said they] don’t use that word. They would say *fragmento*.....So, it is not a very common word. The vocabulary of the test is still very difficult.... You will teach kids what similes are, and they can pick them out like crazy,...and then [the test makers]...will say “What literary technique predominates the first paragraph?” Our kids don’t know *literary technique* and they don’t know *predominates*. If it just said, “Which of the following are there a lot of in the first paragraph?” they would all get it right.

In addition to the difficulty of the reading passages and questions, 10 of the participants—both teachers of advantaged and disadvantaged students—stated that the MCAS test was geared for college-bound students or students in suburbs. For instance, Rich stated, “It’s so obvious that it is a...test for kids who are going to college,” and Gary stated, “It’s a valid predicator of how much college-bound students are learning.” Rich
and Gary's comments highlight the difficulty in creating a test for all students. Those in the standards movement call for high standards, which some teachers in this study seem to equate with standards for the college-bound, and these teachers question why non-college-bound students should be judged by the same criteria as their college-bound peers. Sydney discussed MCAS in terms of the reality of her inner city students' lives:

I think...[MCAS] probably flies well in [the suburbs], but it's a little ambitious for what we've got [in the inner city]....We shouldn't be dumbing down, because the inner city kids are not...any dumber...than the [suburban] kids....I think...given a decent chance in life...[and] with people reading to them...and valuing education, they would do just as well [as suburban kids]...Maybe we do need to go through some very ugly years. But, it's a shame. Thank God they didn't count it for a few years...because otherwise we'd be sacrificing those kids.

Some teachers explained that the problem with suffering through “some very ugly years” and “sacrificing” students is that whole groups of students—particularly those of low socio-economic status—will pay a high price of being denied a diploma at a young age. This is especially true since research shows that a high school diploma is more necessary today than ever before for economic success (Fine, 1991). Diane seemed to question the fairness of Sydney’s statement:

Because these students...can’t...[perform well on MCAS in tenth grade] doesn’t mean that they are never going to be able to do that. Educational psychology tells us that the brain develops at different rates...[and] so some people get to that abstract level much earlier than others do....So, when you have MCAS being given to you in the tenth grade and it determines whether you are going to graduate or not, it is measuring...an abstract ability that even the experts will [say] is just being developed at 15 and 16....So, to penalize them in the tenth grade and not give them a diploma in some ways is very, very unfair.

Furthermore, those teachers such as Tom, Rich, Diane, Tricia, and Don, who teach disadvantaged students, clearly stated that their students would not pass MCAS. They believe MCAS will leave already disadvantaged students even further disenfranchised
economically and socially, widening the already existing chasm between the haves and the have-nots.

Teachers’ distress over the limitations of MCAS. Just as Sydney discussed the complexity of creating a test for all students, 12 teachers explained how MCAS was a limited instrument in assessing what students know and learn. In fact, Mike, Judy, Ramón, and Ethan talked specifically about what MCAS does not measure, such as an understanding of media, responding to longer works of literature, “expression benchmarks,” historical perspectives of literature, and students’ ability to discuss and communicate. For example, Judy stated, “Writing, giving a speech,…acting it out,…having discussions—that is all part of English that cannot be tested [on MCAS].”

Among the vital skills that the MCAS fails to evaluate are some of the very ones outlined in the state’s own frameworks. Ethan, Anne, and Diane said that because the MCAS test emphasizes expository writing, students who are creative writers are not able to demonstrate other writing talents. Natalie—a teacher who believes in the importance of MCAS and who is extremely active in the scoring process—questions why MCAS does not offer students a choice of writing prompts.

Why is MCAS religious about one question? Why isn’t there [a] choice? “Respond to A, B, or C.” One being kind of [a] technical or open-ended [question] for those techie kids, one being for the creative writers, and one being for the straight [academic] students—literary analysis such as they are doing now….Why not do a journal entry, do a letter to a friend, write a poem?….Or, write an editorial about something you feel strongly about?….I don’t see why they couldn’t give them a choice.

This narrow approach to testing writing ability demonstrates the constrictions of the test. The five teachers who work with alternative or vocational students thought, as Ben stated, that MCAS privileges “a narrow scope of what literacy is,” and it fails to
questions, its narrow perspective of literacy, and what MCAS fails to test, some teachers approved of MCAS. Approximately half of the participants stated that what MCAS requires of teachers and students is exactly what they have been doing all along. In a general sense, these teachers stated that, like the MCAS test, they want students to be able to read, comprehend and analyze literature, and write coherently. As Don explained, “All MCAS is really saying is we want our kids to be able to think, read, and write.”

Like Don, other teachers stated that their goals for teaching English were consistent with the goals of MCAS. Mary explained this as follows:

I don’t think it has affected my work in the same way that it has affected a lot of people... just because of a lot of my own philosophies... [and] my own beliefs... I believe that I am teaching my students the skills to pass that test... I have looked at that test, and I have felt confident that my students should be able to pass it. If they have paid attention in my class [and] if they have listened to what I have to say... I don’t know how they could possibly miss it because... analyzing literature to me is the whole point of learning how to enjoy literature.

Teachers like Don and Mary, who felt that the philosophy and goals of MCAS were aligned with their own, said the MCAS test was fair and reasonable. As Mary stated, “I don’t think they [MCAS test developers] are asking these kids to do [work] that is beyond them, not in the English section anyway.”

In-Class Changes: How Test Preparation Affects Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment

It is clear from the teachers’ analysis of the MCAS test that their perceptions varied from thinking MCAS is reasonable and consistent with what students do in class, to thinking MCAS is pitched at a high, unfair, college-bound level. One might think that the teachers who stated that MCAS was “fair” and “reasonable” would be the teachers who were willing to incorporate test content and skills into their curriculum and pedagogy, while teachers who found MCAS to be “unfair” or “limited” would resist
making any changes geared toward test preparation. That assumption would be erroneous. Like some of the literature on high-stakes testing (for example, Cooper & Davies, 1993), all the teachers in this study made adjustments to their curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices in order to match test content and skills. How did these 16 English teachers go about teaching literature, writing, and language under this high-stakes testing requirement? In what ways did teachers incorporate test-taking strategies into their curricula? What was gained, and what was lost as a result of MCAS?

Teachers incorporated test preparation activities in their daily practice by teaching students to read, write, analyze literature, and apply grammar and vocabulary skills. Certainly, this already encompassed the general sense of what teachers do. Nonetheless, the type of instruction was now geared explicitly to match the type of skills that MCAS tests. In other words, the teachers in this study stated that they teach specific literary analysis, reading, and writing skills. Although I separated these topics into distinct sections, the teaching of reading, writing, and literary analysis skills necessarily overlap. For example, when teachers demonstrated how to analyze a piece of literature to provide supporting evidence, they were teaching students to analyze the literature, read a piece of text, and then formulate their ideas in writing.

Preparing Students for MCAS Literary Analysis

In their analysis of the test itself, the teachers noted that MCAS stresses two types of literary analysis, both based on a close reading method of approaching literature. The first is a seek-and-find analysis where students are required to determine what literary

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9 Few teachers if any talked about adjustments they made to their language curricula, that is their grammar and vocabulary curricula. What little teachers talked about regarding grammar, usage, and mechanics, and vocabulary instruction was not significant, nor did this data reveal that teachers changed their curricula and pedagogy to match the type of language skills needed for MCAS.
device is used in a particular passage. Since the test emphasizes these skills, teachers reported stressing this in their instruction by explicitly teaching students to memorize, understand, and apply literary techniques to a piece of writing. Matthew stated that because MCAS requires students to know and understand these techniques, his department had to shift their 9-12 curriculum: “We didn’t really do a lot of stuff with poetic terms...until they did poetry senior year....And, now we’ve seen that that’s...emphasized on the test so we’re going to be doing it much earlier.” Although Matthew explained how he and his department had to change the scope and sequence of their literature curriculum, Ben explained that this emphasis on literary techniques has changed not only his curriculum, but his pedagogy as well:

MCAS very much was driving us back in the direction of what things were like when I went to school. In order to cover all the things that are on that test, there is no time to think about [other topics]....I have an awful lot of young adult literature that I picked for kids who have never read a book cover to cover, but we don’t use that as much [now]. We are in the anthology now because we have got to cover metaphors, smiles, alliteration, consonance, and onomatopoeia. The list just goes on....English classes are now much more traditional,...and I don’t [incorporate] any science...[or] any social studies in [my curriculum now].

Later in the interview, Ben characterized his pedagogy now as “back to drilling.”

Similarly, Sydney stated that her “focus this year” has been “really beating my ninth grade over the head with figurative language.” According to some teachers, the images of students “being beaten over the head” and “drilled” with figurative language seems at odds with their original mission to encourage understanding and appreciation of literature.

Some teachers tried to simplify the students’ understanding of and ability to identify literary devices by developing handouts, guidelines, or “workbooks” for
students. For example, Don gave his students a handout with "about 50 or so literary techniques" that they have to know and have defined before they leave his class. He stated that knowing these terms is helpful when he and his students discuss literature, but Don also stated that the terms help prepare students for MCAS. Similarly, Tom provided students with a handout of poetic devices to review for MCAS:

We do a very close reading of poetry [right before MCAS]... I take one poem, and we really thrash it out.... I give them a sheet of 18 points [for analyzing poetry]: Who is the speaker? What is the setting? What is the time? What is the season? What is the major theme? What is the figurative language? There are 18 things they can ask... to guide themselves through analysis of the poem. And, I do that the week before the test with the test in mind... because the test will ask them for a detailed analysis of... a passage.

Just as Tom scheduled his intense poetry review the week before MCAS, other teachers sequenced their curriculum so that this type of literary analysis work would get done right before students take MCAS. Sydney stated that she saves her poetry unit for the second semester so that these techniques are fresh in the students’ minds. Ethan explained that right before MCAS he spends a day or two with his tenth grade students "refreshing their memory" about "poetry terms." And, Rich stated that even though he "hates" having students "actually sit down and go over [elements of fiction and poetry] and have them memorize [them],” he drills the students on these terms the week before the test because these terms “might trip [students] up on the multiple guess part of it [MCAS].”

MCAS requires students to conduct another form of literary analysis. Students must read literature closely and glean textual support of an argument for their open response and long composition essays. Thirteen teachers stated that they teach students this skill by explaining how to “deconstruct” or “analyze” a passage or work of literature.
Two of the participants said that they teach these skills through questioning techniques.

For example, Tricia explained her method, something she calls "shared inquiry teaching."

I have done a lot with shared inquiry teaching with literature....It is a strategy...where...as you are reading, you are questioning different things....And, as the instructor, you would come up with open-ended questions [for students] in discussion format....As long as they can go back to the literature and present evidence to support their opinion or support their statement, then that is okay....[The students] will actually go back into the book, and [say], “Miss, it is right here, and this is how [I know].”....I think one of my favorite [open-response questions] is [from] Dr. Jekkyl and Mr. Hyde and the whole concept of scientist’s research...going too far....Yeah, in a way [MCAS] has changed [the way I teach literature].

The practice of using open-ended questions to encourage students to refer back to the text is clearly one way that MCAS has changed Tricia’s teaching techniques. Diane said she now teaches her students literary analysis skills by taking them through a methodical procedure to help them be “concrete” about their ideas. She explained this method in terms of teaching characterization:

...in standards-based planning when we talk about character,...we usually deal with an activity....They will have text in front of them, and they will be asked to find words that are directly related to the physical appearance of a character, and they will circle them. They will be asked to...underline words that talk about [a] character’s actions, and they will be asked to write what those actions might tell us about the character....I never did that before....All the MCAS is doing is...[asking students to be] concrete about where are you getting your answers from....Find it and show it to me in the text.”....It gives them credit for having any kind of idea at all as long as it is supported in some way.

The literary analysis methods that Tricia and Diane have devised to help students perform well on MCAS are methods they believe have enhanced their efficacy. While Ben perceived teaching these skills as “drilling,” Tricia and Diane viewed this effort positively.
Teaching Reading Strategies

In the course of the three interviews, two teachers talked about specific reading strategies they teach to help students prepare for the test. Teaching students to read the text closely in order to identify literary techniques and to find supporting evidence are certainly reading strategies. Nonetheless, I distinguish these strategies as literary analysis strategies because the teachers’ objectives for teaching them were to help students analyze literature, not necessarily become better readers in a testing situation. Anne and Mike explained how they taught reading strategies. Anne explained that she uses an MCAS preparation book, which provides students with a list of strategies for “approaching a difficult piece of text—how to skim, when you need all the details.” Mike developed his own methods for helping students “become active readers” so that they will be able to adequately answer the MCAS open response question:

I have them read the blurb, and I tell them to underline the key words and phrases. Basically, [students have] two problems [with comprehension]…. One [is] that they will go too fast, and they don’t know what they’re doing. So, I have them underlining,… [which] makes them slow down…. Then, I have them go to the actual open ended response… [question] and underline the key words in the question, and count the number of tasks that the question requires…. Your score goes down if you don’t answer both parts of the question…. Then,… I have them get into the passage…[using]… an advanced organizer…. My friend who is a reading specialist [said] you comprehend better when you know what you are reading and why you are reading it. So, if you can get that information ahead of time,…[it helps students] become more active readers.

For Mike, “active” reading means having test questions firmly in mind before tackling the text.

Preparing Students for MCAS Writing

Teachers reported that even though they teach students to write MCAS open response and long composition essays in very similar ways, there were slight differences
in their approach to them. For the open response questions, the teachers taught students how to refer back to the text directly in front of them. Tricia’s description of her “shared inquiry” technique is an example of this method. Yet, for the long composition prompt, which does not include a reading passage, teachers taught students how to remember specific aspects of a piece of literature they had read previously. Sydney explained how she “arms” students for the long composition:

[I wanted] to remind [students] about the novel because I had a feeling that they would need to call to mind something they had read....I [did this] before the long writing sample. I said,...“You might have to write about something you’ve read before, and therefore, you’re probably going to be most successful if you choose something that we did together in class.” So, I reminded them of things we had read, and asked them how they would attack it. We went through some scenarios in class verbally, on “Well, if this is the question you were asked....”....I’d throw a theme out, and we’d see if we could work Of Mice and Men into it: “How many themes could we find?”....I was trying to find something that they all felt strong in....So, I wanted them to go in armed...without having to call it to mind at that moment. I told them, “The night before [the test], sit down and try to think of everything you can. Try to think about a character that you could write about from this novel.”

One overwhelming similarity in writing instruction among 15 participants was that they prepared students for the long composition essay by teaching students to write a formal, structured, multi-paragraph, expository essay. Teachers referred to this type of essay differently—a “five paragraph essay,” an “analytical essay,” “formal writing,” “literary analysis,” or “critical essay”—but, they all essentially were teaching students to write the same type of essay.

According to these teachers, the primary focus of their instruction was to teach students explicit organizational skills. Each essay was to follow a specific format—that is, it had to have a “beginning, middle, and an end.” In addition to the structure of the essay, several teachers such as Ben, Natalie, Judy, and Sydney emphasized what should
go in each paragraph. For example, Judy said that she taught her students to include the title and author of the literary work in the first paragraph. The teachers characterized this type of writing as either “formulaic” or “formula” or “template” writing. These 15 teachers explained, often in detail, how they teach formula writing. An example is as follows:

...we are more into formula writing....We are even drawing boxes for each paragraph, [and we]...take the key words from the question, and put them into...an introductory paragraph. Then whatever it is it is asking for, [say] two examples of imagery, [you ] put those in your middle paragraphs and then reiterate some of the key words from the top paragraph and put them in the final paragraph.

Ben explained he and the rest of the teachers in his district sat through several professional development workshops to learn how to teach this formulaic writing. He intimated that he did not like or value this particular method of teaching writing, but that his district administrators insisted that all teachers follow this format. Sydney, on the other hand, said she feels comfortable with the constraints of a formula as a way of controlling her “wandering” students.

I do tend to give them very specific direction on what should be in the first paragraph, what should be in the third paragraph....I found an absolutely wonderful book, Writing about Literature, and...it gives you a template....When we [wrote about] theme,...I gave them the guidelines copied from the book. They had a little chart that said, “Okay, there’s your first paragraph; here’s your second paragraph; here’s your conclusion; this is what goes in each.”....I’m convinced that formula writing right now is [good], [and] that’s what I’m comfortable teaching, because I also need to have some way to grade it. And, if they’re wandering all over the stratosphere [with] everybody doing [her] own thing, it’s difficult for me to grade....I don’t think that they’re good enough writers yet that I can just let them have free rein.
In addition to telling students exactly what goes into each paragraph, Natalie and Mike explained the importance of teaching students the thesis statement. Mike provided explicit directions for writing thesis statements specifically for MCAS tests:

For writing, the thing [that] I keep focusing on is [what] I call TS,...[which is] topic sentence or thesis [statement]....They use the prompt [to write one]. They have to have three things. One, it has to be a complex sentence...with a subordinate clause....The second thing they have to do is use the words from the prompt, and the third thing they have to do is...suggest why they think so....Usually I give sentence starters like although or because, [or] since, and what that does [is] it tends to force them to think...by making qualifications on their basic statement.

Another consistent pedagogical strategy that nine teachers reported using was showing students writing models from previous MCAS tests. These teachers stated that they would show students “what a good essay looks like or [what] a bad essay looks like or an essay that might not meet the requirements.” In doing this, students could compare their work to those of others. Natalie even enlarged the writing samples to poster-size, hung them around the room so that she could refer to them when working with students: “I could say to a kid thereafter, ‘Where would you put this paper that I am looking at here? Which [sample] does it match?....There isn’t enough link here to develop the topic. There isn’t a transition in the whole piece.’...And, they start to be very critical of their work.”

Samples from the MCAS long composition were not the only state materials that teachers used to teach writing. Teachers such as Mary, Mike, and Natalie reported giving students the MCAS rubrics—for both the open response and long composition essays—so that they could help students become familiar with the scoring process. These teachers also stated that they taught the students how to holistically score MCAS writing samples
as well as their peers’ writing. One of the clearest examples of this type of instruction comes from Mary:

...they get into peer editing groups, and I call it “The MCAS Edit”...[I use] the long composition rubric...I have this sheet of paper, and...I break the paper up into three sections,...and then [three separate] editor[s] [give two grades each for] “topic and conventions.”...Then when you get it back, down here it says “comments,” so you have to say why...You can’t just arbitrarily give them a two. You have to explain why; otherwise, they are not going to be able to fix it....If [the comments from] these three [peer editors] don’t match, then I tell them that they have to go back in to conference committee, and...they have to determine what grade it will get....They [then] go back, and they edit the paper all up....With the kids that take it seriously it works exceptionally well....I have sent kids back into committee saying, “I’m sorry. This is not an acceptable editing form,”...[or] “You need to fill out the comments. You need to do this properly.”....And, they know...[because] each kid has a copy of the MCAS rubric in [his or her] folder.

Fifteen teachers often stated that the writing instruction they provide to prepare students for MCAS is usually not a one-shot lesson or unit plan; rather, it is something that they work on all year. According to these teachers, they were able to incorporate this type of instruction into their regular curriculum by developing MCAS-type open response and long composition essay questions. For example, Matthew stated,

When I did *The Scarlet Letter* with [my] sophomore honors class, we did maybe seven or eight open response questions [for] homework...where they had the rubric, they knew what I was looking for, it would be graded by a peer who was also using the rubric, and then I would grade it according to the same number system....I tried to make it sort of part of what I was doing already.

Several teachers welcomed the influence of MCAS on their writing curriculum and pedagogy. Of its benefit for teachers, Natalie stated, “It actually outlines what will be tested, how it will be tested. It gives the teacher a better idea of where to start and what to work on instead of the big theory monster [known as] writing—how do you get a kid from point A to another point....I just think it has brought a new focus to the way
writing is taught, giving it more boundaries.” Diane summed up how she thinks it benefits students when she said, “Kids are really forced to evaluate themselves.... Students no longer can be passive [learners].”

On the other hand, three teachers reported that they either resented or flat out resisted teaching this formulaic, expository essay. Tom stated, “I don’t teach the five paragraph essay, ever.... It is lousy writing.” And, even though Ben does teach “formula writing,” he said, “…it certainly is not encouraging people to write.” Similarly, Ramón stated, “…there are a lot of teachers who say, ‘Oh, but these kids needs to rein in their responses; they need to be more heedful.’.... But, if that is all they do,... you are actually stifling important writing permissions.... The kids continue to be engaging literary analysis, and [yet] invitations to write are more restrictive than enabling.”

Teaching Test-taking Strategies

Just as all teachers, to one degree or another, focused their curriculum and instruction on content and skills for reading, literary analysis, and writing on MCAS, so did all teachers report incorporating actual test-taking strategies into their curricula. First, as I already stated, teachers explained how they helped students become familiar with the MCAS test. They described how they distributed previous MCAS test items, student writing samples, and scoring rubrics. Second, almost all of participants stated that they dedicated class time to going over these items, explaining what was expected, answering student questions, and modeling appropriate reading and writing skills. In addition, some teachers like Tricia recounted how they would demystify some of the language and vocabulary specific to MCAS, teaching students the meaning of test vocabulary such as discuss, explain, and analyze.
Finally, a few teachers felt it was important to teach students specific strategies for answering multiple choice questions. For example, Mary stated that every time she gives students one of her class tests, she reviews with them process of elimination skills for multiple choice questions. Gary, a teacher who has received extensive training for teaching and scoring Advanced Placement (AP) tests, said that he uses this testing knowledge to prepare his students for answering multiple choice questions on MCAS:

I spent a lot of time on...the logic behind multiple choice answers,...[I taught students] how [to] arrive at the right answer [through] process of elimination, looking for patterns, going back and perhaps rethinking your previous answers if you see a pattern developing in questions later on....If you have like 10 multiple choice questions on, say, one passage...usually there’s a pattern you can actually can see developing....Most of the questions are somehow related, [and one can find] certain key words repeated in the right answers....Usually, you can find the right answer [through] process of elimination first,...and then...there might be two right answers....[I tell students to ask,] “What answer is better to have and why?....It’s tough, but...I draw on my experience with the AP [test].

The teachers’ stories reveal that beyond the testing of content knowledge and comprehension, MCAS asks students to possess skills in determining patterns and other test related schemes. These teachers’ experiences contradict the premise that the recent high-stakes, high standards tests are supposed to test content knowledge, for as the teachers explain it, MCAS tests more than knowledge and skills related to English language arts; it tests test-taking knowledge as well.

What participants in this study reported is quite consistent with the existing research literature about incorporating testing skills in the curriculum (Herman & Golan, 1991; Smith, 1991a). Nevertheless, my findings are not consistent with the literature, which states that teachers who work with disadvantaged, minority, and/or low socio-economic students (for example, Herman, Abedi, & Golan, 1994; Lomax et al., 1995) are
more likely to teach test-taking strategies to their students. In fact, I found little correlation to the type and degree of test preparation and the type of students teachers taught. That is, teachers who worked with middle class students were just as likely as teachers who worked with working class or minority students to teach test-taking strategies to their students.

The Influence of MCAS on Assessment

Just as MCAS affected the teachers’ curricular and instructional decisions and practices, 10 participants stated that MCAS had an impact on the way they assess students. For some, this impact was profound in that they completely transformed the way they graded students’ writing and constructed their classroom tests; for others, the change was only slight.

Judy’s experience is an example of a profound adjustment. Her freedom to design her own semester exams was altered when her superintendent mandated that all same-grade teachers collaboratively develop departmental exams. She stated,

We have to have a departmental test...so, we have to have consistent assessment so we will know what the kids are learning, so we can know what to do, so they can pass the MCAS test....Ergo, we have got to...[teach] the same kinds of [literature] the same way....All of this is because of the MCAS test, because how are you going to assess your program in light of the MCAS test unless you all have same assessment?....Everything now is assessment, assessment, assessment...because the MCAS is the ultimate assessment.

Of the 16 participants I interviewed, Judy and Ben were the only ones who had been forced via a district or school policy to change their assessments. All of the other participants, who modified the ways in which they evaluate students, reported that they did so voluntarily.
Eight other teachers changed the way they constructed their classroom tests by incorporating passage analysis, multiple choice and open response questions. Sydney explained how she altered the way she wrote her final examinations:

MCAS has definitely played a large part in the fact that I have...no true/false questions on my exam. I have no fill-in-the-blanks. It’s all essay, or it’s predominately passages...[where students] write about something within the passage, find, [and] give evidence from whatever the text is, or translate a piece of writing by [an author such as] Shakespeare.

Similarly, Ben and Natalie each stated that they include more “passage analysis” questions on their tests, and they also attribute these changes directly to the test’s influence. In fact, Natalie explained that her experiences as a table leader for the MCAS scoring made her more reflective and serious about the process of constructing essay questions:

I can spend...two hours coming up with three essay questions now because I know that certain words will trigger [a certain] kind of a response....You can’t flop out a question and expect them to know [what you mean]....It has to be careful, it has to be broken down so that they can see its parts, and always it has to be asking for higher level thinking.

Gary and Ethan discussed how they started incorporating multiple choice questions on their tests. In fact, these teachers stated that they have a new awareness and appreciation for writing multiple choice questions and what these questions can evaluate. For example, Ethan stated that he has learned that multiple choice questions are “really hard to write.” He explained, “It’s not so hard to write the question or the answer; it is the other three choices that are hard...to not make them so obvious that they are not the answer. Particularly, it is hard to write a multiple choice question that is interpretive...not factual.”
One of the more significant changes that six teachers reported had to do with their use of rubrics. Some teachers explained that they started using the MCAS rubric in their classes, while others created their own rubrics, which were similar to MCAS. One teacher, Tricia, had never even heard of a rubric until MCAS. Several teachers made glowing comments about the benefits of using rubrics. For example, Mary stated, “It was almost like I was looking for something to focus my grading.... It is something that you really can’t argue with.... It makes grading essays a little less subjective.” Natalie, who had developed her own MCAS-like rubric, testified that rubrics helped keep her “honest.”

She explained,

If you are really looking at the criteria under each of the designations [on the rubric], they keep you focused on your correction, and they keep you honest. You can love a kid to pieces, but if he did not develop that detail, he did not develop that detail,... and what I love about my rubric,... which is very MCASy, is that it has stopped debate.... It tells the kid exactly what he did right, exactly what he did wrong. It takes me out of the mix.... It defends the grade.... The other [thing] that [the rubric] is good for is that when you are reading a lot of papers, [it keeps me honest].... We all know what it is like to have the top of pile be getting very high grades and the bottom of the pile be getting low grades because of fatigue.... The kids get to really value that. “She doesn’t pigeon hole. She doesn’t play favorites.” The kids have that picture [of the quality of their writing].

Losses and Gains to Changes in Curricular and Instructional Practices

Losses Associated with MCAS

The 16 participants in this study all reported that MCAS prompted them to make changes in their curricula, instruction, and assessment practices. What did teachers report was lost in making these changes? The teachers answered this question by explaining they experienced several losses—losses to their curricula, their instruction, their school environment as well as losses for their students. Because many teachers focused their curriculum to match the content and skills that MCAS tests, they had to give up some of
the things they once enjoyed teaching and/or thought was important to teach. For example, as Ben stated above, because he now feels he has to “drill” literary techniques with students and teach a specific type of literary analysis, he no longer uses young adult literature with his students, nor is he able to incorporate other subjects in his teaching. He also discussed broader, more worldly topics such as evolution, race, and religion he no longer engaged in with his students. Ben stated that he no longer has time to discuss these “legitimate” subjects because he needed to adhere to a specific MCAS preparation curriculum.

Like Ben, other teachers such as Tricia, Diane, Anne, Gary, Judy, and Matthew listed topics, ideas, or concepts that are now lost because of their efforts to prepare students for MCAS. Judy explained how in the process of realigning her department’s English curriculum with the state’s curriculum frameworks, she could no longer teach certain literature because these works are not part of the traditional canon that she and her colleagues perceive MCAS prescribes:

The state had a list of desired material...[and] so we took that list, and we had to look through all the books that we had to find out...how much of this material this school had on hand. [This] says to me that I am supposed to be teaching that list. And, you know what we found out? The book that had the most of that material was the oldest of all those books we had. So we are not going forward. We are going backwards....And, what about the authors [like]...Maya Angelou? [The curriculum frameworks] throw in a token [author of color] here and there, but it is [mostly] the old canon....No [we are not required to use the old anthologies], but [when] you’ve got a curriculum director [that says], “Let’s show them how much we have read of this [list],”...what do you think? Most of us are fearful that the novel is going to go by the wayside,...that we will be teaching out of an anthology because it is the only way [to cover the list of authors in the curriculum frameworks]. In fact, I never [used] an anthology, [but]...now I have to get the anthology.
Other teachers stated they could no longer teach certain units, such as a unit on film studies, or they could no longer teach certain novels. Teachers feared that imaginative projects and creative writing would all become (if they had not already) a low priority.

Furthermore, just as Ben talked about the lack of time to teach what he felt were important concepts, time was also a contentious issue for five other teachers as well. Several teachers said that the amount of time it takes for the actual administration of MCAS “takes a large chunk of teaching time out of every year.” Several teachers named an actual number of weeks, days or hours—“seven or eight days,” “19 hours,” “four weeks”—of testing time. They also explained that they lost even more time on learning either because of the way the test was scheduled in their schools, or because “If you have that period right after MCAS, those kids are just fried...so we are not able to do quite as much.”

In addition, teachers such as Anne, Ethan, and Matthew stated that they felt a certain amount of “pressure” to cover curricula before the MCAS test. According to several teachers this time-crunch resulted in having “to squeeze...in or eliminate some [units].” Gary, Mike, Ben, Judy, and Ethan feared that they would no longer have time “to get through a novel...so you have to bombard them with short stories.” Gary explained this loss as follows: “I know a lot of teachers have been complaining about the length of Great Expectations...[and] David Copperfield. I love teaching both of those novels, but I have a feeling in order to make more room for the MCAS, the novels are going to reduced....They’re probably reading more, but [the literature]...won’t be [as] challenging.” Finally, a few teachers talked about time pressure in terms of “covering” or
pacing. Judy explains this loss as follows: "I have to teach boom, boom, boom....So, am I going to have time to do this? Can I go off on one of my creative whims?"

Four teachers talked about how MCAS has changed their school environment, which they associated with a loss. For example, Tom explained, "Every moment I spend accommodating the test...it doesn't feel very good....[This] is essentially a loss of atmosphere....It seems a little plastic [because]...I am not teaching them to read closely because there is a joy in that...kind of reading....I am teaching it because I am trying to get them to look good on a test. It is not a good feeling." Several teachers talked about how, as a result of MCAS, their schools were now more "punitive" because as Anne stated, "[MCAS] will probably penalize some students who will never be able to do well in this kind of test" and that "it will create winners and losers."

One result of MCAS creating this system of "winners and losers" is that certain teachers worried about what type of education students—particularly students whom teachers believe will not pass MCAS—will receive. Judy stated,

The kind [of tracking] that we have here [is] where you encourage kids to explore [their] talents....What if you are not academic, but damn it, you can draw? But, you can't take your art courses because you've got to take all the remedial courses to pass the freaking MCAS. You are denying [students] access to whatever talent they may have.

Ben and Rich reported that their schools have eliminated certain electives and study halls, and teachers no longer had time to take students on fieldtrips. In addition, Ben explained how his vocational school's efforts to raise MCAS scores by doubling the number of English courses was changing the mission of his school: "[One of my concerns is over our] struggle to maintain an identity as a vocational school because that is why kids [go
Ben, went on to say that all of these school efforts were restricting the “social world of the school”:

I think the social world of the school is very confined because of MCAS...School has become a much more punitive place...I loved high school...I didn’t like all of it, but the social world was good. For these kids it is just not the same...I took art [and other electives] every year...[Now] it is all time on learning—business, business, business...and I think if [adults who are making these decisions] think back on it,...it wasn’t [that confining] when they went to school. One of the missions of schools was socialization. If you don’t have a social world left or one that isn’t worth anything, [it’s hard on kids]....You have to let kids be kids.

Ben believes MCAS only adds to his students’ already stressed lives, which does not make school and education in general a welcoming experience for students.

Several teachers, particularly those who teach disadvantaged students, stated that the losses for their students were the most significant losses. Tom, Ben, Anne, and Rich spoke about what students will lose when they are denied a diploma, or when they become so frustrated with trying to pass MCAS that they quit school. Rich stated that students also will lose their self esteem: “[My vocational students] come in already hurting through many years of unsuccessful academic experience....They have been tracked early on and told they were dumb,...[that] they can’t do this [and]...that they are misfits, and by god, this test is going to reinforce that....But, they are not dumb at all....They just have a different way of learning.” Tom and Rich admitted that they teach the students who are “the bottom layer of the whole county,” and yet, they both said that all of their students are literate as well as smart in ways MCAS does not evaluate.

Gains Associated with MCAS

Just as teachers reported losses to their curricula, instruction, and work environment, they likewise reported experiencing many gains. What were teachers’
perceptions of the gains associated with this high-stakes test? Eleven teachers felt that they gained something through the process of examining their curricula and readjusting it to match the state curriculum frameworks and/or the content of the MCAS test. The teachers stated that this process has focused them on a "concrete goal" or a "common goal," while others stated it "tightened some things up" and "clarified the areas to deal with." Anne explained this gain as follows:

For the first time in the history of [our school, we] have had to write a curriculum... because of the MCAS exam... Previously, we really did our own thing... We [now have] sat down as a department and reviewed the frameworks and talked about what should be covered in each grade level, and... we aligned with the [NCTE] national standards, school standards and the state's standards.... This I look at in a very positive way. It has made us articulate what we do.... I think this will help us improve.

Teachers reported that including new or different content in their curricula to prepare students for MCAS was also a benefit. For example, Ethan stated that because of MCAS he has started teaching more non-fiction, something he calls a "plus." Ben stated that he has renewed his interest in teaching poetry: "[Now] we have been doing some interesting things like having coffee houses and poetry contests.... The kids are very positive about it.... That is one area in English... that MCAS has done better."

One teacher, Gary, reported that developing curriculum with an awareness of MCAS made teachers more accountable:

I think teachers are becoming more accountable, and I think that’s good.... I don’t say that they are accountable to the state or to the principal or the parents, but to ourselves. We want the kids to do well on MCAS. I think we push ourselves a little bit more... or we structure ourselves a little bit more.... [We have] coordinated ourselves with the ninth grade teachers... I think that’s been a pretty positive effect on everyone.

Similarly, many teachers stated that MCAS fosters student accountability, which these teachers view as a significant improvement. Teachers such as Mary, Judy, Anne, Gary,
and Matthew said that MCAS will make students more “serious” about their own education, and Diane in particular said that MCAS forces students to be “active in learning in order to succeed.”

Another gain Anne, Natalie, Tricia, and Mary reported was that of collegiality and collaboration in the process teachers went through to examine and revamp their curricula. Natalie, who worked with a district team of K-12 English Language arts teachers, said she experienced “camaraderie.” Similarly, Anne stated, “As a high school teacher, you never get a chance for a team to work together with members of your department,… and so we were able to sit down [together and work]…. Some of us have known each other more than 20 years, and some people are brand new to the department…. So, it has been a time to reacquaint [ourselves].”

Finally, three teachers—Tricia, Sydney, and Diane—reported that MCAS had a positive influence on their pedagogy. As stated above, Tricia learned to use inquiry approaches to teaching literary analysis. More significant, however, were Diane and Sydney’s explanations for a complete pedagogical shift. Sydney revealed that as a result of MCAS and the curriculum frameworks, she shifted her focus from the literature to the standards she wanted students to master, and thus student learning became key:

There is some value in consciously sitting down and saying,…. “What standard can Romeo and Juliet be used as a vehicle to teach?”…. There’s more value in that because it takes… the focus off… the literature…. Therefore, you don’t just get this, done-that-been-there-moving-on kind of mindset…. You’re more interested in the student learning rather than just, “Did we cover that?”

Similarly, Diane shifted her pedagogy to privilege active student learning:

I think… [my teaching practice] is much more focused than it used to be, and it is much more skill-based than it once was…. Standards-based planning really forces the teacher to plan with the assessment in mind and
the criteria for assessment before the tasks are planned. When I taught at another school, we would have discussions with mostly me talking about the literature. It was fun to talk but it didn’t require too much participation on the part of the student except for looking attentive. Now we go through strategies for finding concrete details in literature over and over again. I very much in the past was “Let’s read and discuss, read and discuss, read and discuss.” Now, I am asking them to show me much more than tell me. “Show me, show me, show me.”

Summary of Findings

Teachers’ analysis of the tenth grade English Language Arts MCAS test was comprehensive. They stated that this test covers three major areas of the high school English curriculum: literature, language and composition. These teachers explained that the test required students to read text passages closely and that it emphasized two particular methods of analyzing literature: (a) identifying literary techniques in a passage, and (b) providing evidence from the text to support their ideas in writing paragraphs. Regarding writing skills, the participants stated that MCAS required students to write what is traditionally known as a five paragraph essay for the long composition, and an organized paragraph for the open response questions. The participants’ critique of MCAS was mixed. Some teachers viewed the content as consistent with what they already do in their classrooms, while others thought it missed the mark on several levels: the reading passages were pitched at a high level and did not reflect the type of reading they teach in their classes; the questions were difficult, picayune, tricky, or confusing; the entire test was pitched at a college-bound level; crucial aspects of the state curriculum frameworks were not tested; and MCAS tested a narrow scope of literacy and knowledge.

Despite these teachers’ mixed reviews of MCAS, they all made adjustments to their curriculum, instruction, and assessment procedures in order to match test content
and skills, which is consistent with the research literature on the effects of high-stakes testing on teachers (for example, Cooper & Davies, 1997; Corbett & Wilson, 1987; Rosenholtz, 1987; Wideen, O’Shea, & Pye, 1997; Zancanella, 1992). Teachers reported teaching students to memorize, understand, and apply literary techniques to a piece of text, and they taught students how to read a passage closely to glean textual support in order to construct an argument for a long composition or open response essay. Two teachers reported teaching students specific reading strategies useful in testing situations. Some teachers characterized these practices as “drilling” and contrary to their preferred philosophy of teaching students to appreciate, understand, and make personal meaning of literature. Yet, others stated that this imposed concentration on literary techniques and text-based analysis was welcomed because it helped them figure out what was important to teach, and this focus made these teachers better able to meet the needs of their students.

Furthermore, using various methods, the teachers stated that they taught their students how to write a formal, multi-paragraph, expository essay, which some teachers called formulaic or template writing. The teachers typically stated that they used the state-sanctioned MCAS materials (samples of student writing, scoring rubrics, test questions) to aid them in their instruction. Some teachers explained that they were able to incorporate this type of instruction within their existing writing curriculum. As with the incorporation of literary analysis into their curricula, the teachers had mixed reactions to including this type of writing instruction into their practice. Some stated that this type of writing provided focus and boundaries for students, while others found this type of
writing to be a restricting, limiting mode of writing, which failed to encourage more meaningful writing.

Almost all teachers explained that they taught students test-taking strategies such as how to deconstruct the test passages and questions, how to read and understand test directions, and how to answer multiple choice questions using techniques such as process of elimination strategies. Additionally, teachers modeled test appropriate reading and writing skills for students.

One of the most significant findings was how teachers whole-heartedly embraced MCAS methods of evaluation and incorporated them into their own assessment practices. Many teachers praised the MCAS rubric, and lauded it as an objective, focused method of evaluating student writing. Other teachers talked about how they learned a great deal about the nuances of constructing multiple choice questions on their own classroom tests.

There is no doubt that MCAS fulfills one of its purposes, that is, to drive curricular and instructional practices. Teachers reported several gains of this forced change: a focus on a concrete goal, the incorporation of new content into their curricula, teacher and student accountability and motivation, and for a few, a pedagogical shift. The teachers also reported a host of losses: interdisciplinary approaches to teaching English; non-canonical literature from the curricula; longer novels; creative projects; feelings of pressure and stress to cover rather than teach curricula; enrichment activities such as fieldtrips; loss of atmosphere (schooling seems more “plastic” and “punitive”).

Concluding Comments

One teacher, Tricia, summarizes MCAS’ influence on practice using a fitting metaphor: “I think MCAS is the puppeteer…pulling the strings….In order to
succeed...you need to have the standards-based units of teaching....I can see the
MCAS...[as] the actual puppeteer, and everything else is helping that puppeteer be
successful.” The “everything else” of which Tricia speaks is how administrators and
teachers interpret this policy. Policymakers believe that MCAS as a top-down mandate
will force teachers to teach certain content and skills and force students to learn these
skills. The findings from this study show that teachers are changing their practice as a
result of MCAS.

Although their experiences varied, overall, MCAS had a profound effect on the
participants’ practice. For teachers such as Ben, Tricia, and Judy who experienced
significant systemic changes to their curriculum and scheduling, the impact of MCAS
was obvious. Similarly, for teachers like Natalie, Sydney, and Diane who embraced
MCAS and touted it in laudable terms, the effects of MCAS were equally transparent.
What is interesting, however, is that seven teachers early on in the interview process
stated that MCAS did not change what they do, and yet they went on to describe
significant changes to their curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices as the
interviews progressed. By the end of the final interview, these teachers had come to
realize the impact that MCAS had on their practice. Much like Tricia’s puppeteer,
MCAS was directing the professional movements of teachers with motives and mandates
of which the players may or may not have been fully aware. It appears that there is no
definitive conclusion that these teachers, as a whole, have reached in regards to MCAS
on their practice. This is in sharp contrast to their unanimous, resounding perception
about how MCAS has affected their professional identities, as I will discuss in Chapter
Five.
CHAPTER 5

THE IMPACT OF MCAS ON TEACHERS’ PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES

Introduction

One could argue that the tenth grade English Language Arts MCAS test is just like any other standardized test. After all, it is an instrument intended to evaluate students’ knowledge and skills. In reality, MCAS is not just a test. Rather, it is a high-stakes test, which means three things: (a) The purpose of the test is to drive curricular and instructional improvements; (b) the scores will be used to make comparisons among schools and districts (and possibly teachers); and, (c) the scores will be used to hold students, teachers, schools, and districts accountable for student performance.

As this high-stakes test now stands, students are held accountable by a policy that requires them to achieve a passing score on the tenth grade math and English MCAS tests in order to be eligible for graduation. Teachers, schools, and districts are held accountable by a system of rewards and sanctions and by public comparisons of students’ performance on the test. Throughout the interviews, teachers often spoke about MCAS as a high-stakes test. These teachers’ experiences with MCAS were framed by the fact that MCAS has stakes attached to it and not that MCAS was simply an instrument used to assess students’ performance. The teachers in this study reported that the two faces of MCAS—MCAS as a test instrument and MCAS as a high-stakes test—had differing, yet equally compelling, effects on their professional identities.
MCAS as a Test Instrument: Enhancing Professional Identities

Providing Validity and Credibility

Four teachers found that MCAS as a test instrument gave them professional validity and credibility, which heightened their sense of teacher efficacy. There are many definitions of teacher efficacy (see Smylie, 1990), but the one I use to illustrate the teachers’ experiences in this study comes from Susan Rosenholtz’s (1989) definition, which she calls “teacher certainty” (p. 105). Rosenholtz states that teacher certainty comes, in part, from “the amount of positive feedback teachers receive. The greater the recognition flowing to teachers, the more certain they feel about a technical culture and their own instructional practice” (p. 110). In this study, MCAS as a test provided the teachers with “positive feedback,” not via personal communication with a colleague or evaluator, but in terms of match between the teachers’ curricula and test content. In other words, these teachers reported that since the content and skills associated with MCAS mirrored what they already do in the classroom, they felt as if MCAS confirmed that what they were doing was right, good, and correct. Natalie explained this as follows:

One of the things I think [MCAS] did [was] it validated for me what I was doing....A friend of mine and I...fine tuned a little system of writing that we used in our classrooms....Then, she and I both became involved in MCAS, and lo and behold [the type of writing on MCAS] is what we were teaching. So, it kind of validated what we had been doing, and what we had handed out in our classrooms....The rubric that she and I designed for our school has the same breakdowns as the MCAS rubric, and it was just a natural marriage....We were delighted to find that we were all thinking in similar ways....We definitely had a system of writing in place when we wandered into MCAS, and MCAS just strengthened it.

For Natalie, the fact that MCAS validated what she was already doing in regard to teaching writing made her more certain about her own efficacy as a teacher, and this validation was a source of power for her. By taking on the identity of an MCAS expert,
Natalie felt empowered to help others understand the importance of teaching the right skills and knowledge. Natalie became what Rosenholtz (1989) calls a “teacher leader,” which is someone who reaches out to others “with encouragement, technical knowledge to solve classroom problems, and enthusiasm for learning new things” (p. 208). Natalie relished her role as an MCAS “teacher leader,” when she stated, “I think [my colleague] and I are pretty well known as ‘the MCAS ladies’ in our building, and if we don’t do it, it doesn’t get done. My principal has already told... me that he would like us to do something with MCAS this year.” Natalie talked about several things she did to help her colleagues understand MCAS and ways to prepare their students for MCAS. She said, “I undertook making a little chart for my department that would help them incorporate those frameworks into their lesson plan.” Natalie also explained how her colleagues approached her to give a workshop on how MCAS is scored and how they could incorporate open response questions into their curriculum and instruction.

All of these activities provided teachers like Natalie with the “flowing” recognition of which Rosenholtz speaks. Hence, this recognition gave Natalie more credibility among her colleagues. Further, Matthew, Sydney, and Anne stated that their colleagues viewed them as English teachers who have some valuable knowledge about writing, which enhanced their status among their colleagues. These teachers were pleased that they were finally being recognized for the amount and difficult nature of their work. For example, Matthew stated,

[I know teachers in other departments] do writing across the curriculum so they are prepared for all those open response [questions] to math [and other subjects]....[Teaching writing] has been resented [by teachers in other departments]. I know that. The teachers [in other departments]...think it is just too much of a burden. [They say,] “Oh we have to read all this stuff, and we can’t use scantrons.”....Other
departments are starting to see how much work the English department actually has to do. Finally, someone sees it.

Similarly, Sydney talked about how the amount of writing on MCAS has increased the importance of the English teachers' job:

If you can’t communicate well, you’re not only not going to do well on MCAS for the language arts, [but] you’re not going to do well on MCAS in social studies, or science, or math because you can’t write the essays that are necessary. So, actually I could say that that means that the English teacher’s role is even a greater role than any other teacher in the system because... she/he is providing the foundation to be successful in all of MCAS.

In addition, teachers also reported that MCAS gave them added credibility with their students. For example, Sydney stated,

I remember... I would bring [MCAS] up [and say], “Okay, you need to know this for MCAS.” I would use it, not so much as a boogy man as... to give credibility to what I was teaching. “You may not think this is important, but I know they’re going to ask it on the MCAS, so let’s try real hard to remember this.”... In the long run it is nice having another goal, another purpose to be there teaching them this [information].... But, that’s just going to be incredible to see if there’s a big change between tenth graders’ attitude this year and tenth graders’ attitudes next year. Are they going to suddenly... throw themselves at my feet and worship me as the source of all knowledge so that they can pass the MCAS?

Similarly, Matthew stated the following:

[MCAS]... validates some of the things I’ve already done.... When I’m teaching the skills on the test, I know now that they’ll go, “Oooo this is important to me,” whereas you don’t always get a sense that what you’re doing is important. They’ll do it to get the grade, and here they’re doing it to do well on the test.... It’s outside the classroom, another group of people, the state of Massachusetts says this is important, not just the teacher. Whereas when I’m giving a grade, it’s just what I think is important.... It’s good [because]... what is important to me and what is on the test are consistent. [When I say,] “We’re going to do this. It’s on the test,” someone else says it’s important, not just me.

When Matthew and Sydney stated that MCAS adds to their “self-importance” or grants them recognition for what they as English teachers do, they are saying that MCAS
strengthened their sense of “teacher certainty,” self-esteem, and status amongst their colleagues and students. Ultimately, MCAS gave these teachers more authority and feelings of empowerment.

**Improving Identity through Professional Opportunities**

For seven participants in this study, MCAS empowered them through their involvement in professional activities. These activities not only made the teachers feel valued, but also provided them with extra income. For example, Diane stated, “Oh, it has given me an awful lot of opportunities to earn money and practice things…. I got to tutor [students in an after school MCAS seminar, and] I did sign up for a workshop in the development of an MCAS guide.” Like Diane, several teachers such as Gary, Tom, and Ben reported earning extra money by teaching or tutoring students in afterschool or summer MCAS preparation courses. Anne, Sydney, and Diane reported that they were paid through grants from the state or from their district to work on curriculum committees. Although several teachers reported that they enjoyed earning extra money, they also liked the fact that teachers were paid for the extra time and effort they devoted to these professional activities. As Anne stated, “Because of MCAS, our grant writer… got us money to study the frameworks to give each department time to write the curriculum, and so in our lives time is money.” Being paid for extra work made these teachers feel more valued as professionals.

Money was not the only source of professional empowerment. Research has shown that teachers often suffer from professional isolation, rendering them anxious about their effectiveness as teachers (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Lortie, 1975). Yet, research has also shown that providing teachers with professional opportunities to connect with
colleagues can empower teachers and enhance them professionally (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Little, 1982; Rosenholtz, 1989). Just interacting and sharing ideas with other teachers made some of the participants in this study simply feel more professional. For example, Natalie explained her experiences related to MCAS:

I think that is one of the things I love about MCAS the most; it brings teachers from all over the state together. They meet, they compare notes, [and] they develop a renewed respect for the profession [and] for one another. I have met such classy teachers this week that I never ever would have met without this, and we have shared ideas and curriculum notes and philosophies, and it is such a professional development tool that if it accomplished nothing else, it has been worth it for that.

Five participants talked about their experiences in scoring MCAS. One teacher, Natalie, explained that she was even a table leader for the MCAS scoring process. She explains her position as follows:

For quite a few years I have been a table leader. A table leader is somebody who receives pretty intense training....I had to be gone for two or three days, and...you were really put through your paces on how [to score], and [I was] tested and checked against other correctors and scorers—they call it calibrating—until we all got thinking on the same plane, [which means] that we all recognized what a four was [or] what a five was....Then it was going to be our job to train scorers to do that same thing in smaller groups.

Natalie stated that she valued this experience, and one of the reasons she did so was that she felt the people in charge of the scoring process trusted her enough to have this position of authority. Moreover, she stated that they valued her as a professional. She explained this as follows: “They are always tapping teachers’ brains. That is another thing I respect about MCAS. They want teacher input. They respect teacher input. They do see us as professional....I am asked 15 times a day ‘What do you think about this? What do you think we should do about that?’ They are welcoming suggestions.”
According to these teachers, they were made to feel that their opinions, input, suggestions, knowledge, and experiences were valued by persons in authority. In a sense, their voices were heard. This, in turn, granted teachers some added authority in their own right, and ultimately, their identity as professionals was heightened.

MCAS as a High-Stakes Test: Undermining Teachers’ Professional Identity
Eradicating Authority and De-professionalizing Teachers

Although many teachers welcomed the “focus” and “clarity” provided by the curriculum frameworks, which forms the basis of MCAS, seven teachers expressed resentment over their lack of involvement in making wider curricular, instructional, and assessment decisions. For example, Ethan stated that he resents “those people who don’t understand education as much [as I do]…making these decisions.” Ben, likewise, lamented his lack of power when he said teachers are doing a lot of things “that are being dictated to us.”

Mary and Tom reported that they were insulted by the implication from the curriculum frameworks that they were not doing their job, and that they didn’t know what to teach. Mary explained this as follows:

I was doing a very good job without ed reform….I think that [teachers] were offended that someone says, “Now, well, you have to do this.” And, I think that [the teachers’] thought process [was], “Excuse me, I am a professional. I am educated. I have been doing this for a really long time, and I know what I am doing, and I already do this. You don’t have to cram it down my throat and make an announcement on the news that teachers now have to do this because I have been doing that for the last 15 years.”….I definitely think it is frustrating. It is like someone is saying, “Okay, you need to make sure that you put on new underwear every morning.” It is almost like, “What? Do you think that I am stupid?”….I know enough as an English teacher…to teach my students how to analyze literature. That is the point of it all. What else would I be doing? I know enough as an English teacher to teach vocabulary. What else would I be doing?….I definitely think it is insulting to a vast majority to teachers.
Like Mary, Tom was equally offended by the assumption that the authors of the curriculum frameworks and MCAS make about his ability to do his job. Tom questioned the image that policymakers have of teachers and what teachers do:

I am doing everything those stupid little strands [of the curriculum frameworks] say you should do. It is a description of what you should be doing anyway without being told by a bunch of blockheads down at DOE that this is the way that you should do it. The problem is...what do they think the ideal teacher looks like, or never mind the ideal teacher...a competent teacher? What are they supposed to be doing?...Teaching is full of incompetence. So is law. So is medicine. So is everything else. Big surprise....What do they think they are accomplishing?

Two teachers stated that they viewed public and state officials as distrusting teachers to make right decisions in their classrooms. Tom said that the frameworks and MCAS were “code” that state officials were “going to teach the stupid teachers to get going and start working.” Judy stated that these policies stripped her of her authority to make decisions about her students’ performance and abilities:

Where is the teacher’s role in this MCAS test? Where does my judgment as a professional come in? Today I went to a doctor. He is a professional....He said, “I think you should have these tests,” and I am not too happy about having these tests, but as a professional he is giving me his opinion as to what I should have done....I am supposed to be a professional. Now a test comes in, and if I say this kid is working to the best of his ability—he comes to school, he does everything right,...he is in a transitional English class [and], he is in SPED [classes], but he has accomplished something—I think he deserves to be recognized for that accomplishment. The state is coming in and saying, “Phoo, on you.” Who knows them and taught them for 180 days? That is more than this doctor is going to see me. And, the state is saying, “Your opinion counts for nothing. Your grade counts for nothing. Your evaluation counts for nothing. Your assessment counts for nothing because they can’t pass the test. What you say counts for nothing.” I think the transcript says it all....All an employer has to ask for is the transcript. He sees special education classes on the transcript, and [when] he meets the kid, he is going to know what he has before him. It doesn’t take a genius to figure it out. It is just like this doctor. I waited so that he could get facts from my other doctor, so that he could read what that other doctor said [in order] to
decide what he was going to do. How come I am not professional like that? How come my opinion means squat?

Judy feels that her ability to assess students has been superseded by the MCAS test. She interprets this as state officials not trusting her to know how to do her job.

In addition to feeling mistrusted about making daily classroom decisions, two teachers talked about how this mistrust carried over beyond classroom matters. Tom and Ben discussed how the state did not even trust them to properly administer the MCAS test. Tom saw this tactic as typical of how teachers are treated. He explained this as follows:

This year we were meant to sign an oath [saying] that we understood that if we did cheat [by revealing the particular questions and passages on MCAS] that we would lose our certification....People started grumbling about that,...and this is all 48 hours before the test started....The rumor swept the state that somebody was going to sue the DOE over this pledge, so at the last minute we didn’t have to sign the oath. This is just emblematic of how bull-headed all these people are. It is ridiculous....Of course, that is the way that teachers get treated.

Similarly, Ben talked about his reaction to this request from state officials, and he expressed concern that the state was taking their controlling efforts too far:

When I think of the abuse that teachers have taken in all of this, it just isn’t fair....[The state officials] put out a memo...telling us that we were not allowed to memorize the questions on the MCAS. Can you imagine them sitting [and saying,] “We are going to put that down there that they can’t memorize those questions”?....That came out just before the writing sample, and they backed off from it. They wanted us to sign that statement....It is bizarre....It is absurd, you know, the arrogance and audacity of telling you what you can and can’t do with your mind....It is all about control and manipulating.

Not only did Tom and Ben find the state’s request to sign a no-cheating oath insulting, but also they viewed it as a method of controlling their intellect.
Furthermore, teachers reported that in some instances this lack of trust filtered down to the district/school level, where administrators in turn tried to control teachers' decisions and actions. For example, Judy's administrators attempted to control teachers' curriculum and instruction by mandating that all teachers teach to the same departmental tests. Moreover, Judy, Ben, and Natalie reported that their administration required them to present reports, tests, and lesson plans documenting the standards they were covering, and how they were meeting them. According to five teachers, department chairs started insisting that they include open response and/or multiple choice questions on their tests, and they even started mandating particular forms of writing instruction. Matthew even stated that his administration asked all the teachers to present students "the party line," which meant a "positive approach" to MCAS. Ben characterized these top-down control efforts as follows: "When you exert all this pressure from the top down, it is like a domino effect. It is like the boss hog, who slaps the next hog, who slaps the one below him, and so on."

Experienced veteran teachers like Gary, Judy, Ben, and Tom believed these controlling efforts to be connected to other educational reform efforts—all of which sent teachers a message that they were not be trusted. For example, teachers connected the high-stakes testing policies to changes in the recertification process, the governor's threats to fingerprint teachers, and the recent Board of Education (BOE) mandate requiring the testing of math teachers in schools where students failed to improve their MCAS scores by a certain percentage. Two teachers talked about how the state's teacher recruitment program, which awards a select few new and untrained teachers a $20,000 bonus, sent veteran teachers a message that they, who have put in so many years in the
field, were not valued. As Judy stated, “There is no such thing as a teaching professional anymore because they can take just... somebody who hasn’t gone to school for 20 years and say, ‘Come on and teach because you can do... as well as the person who is trained as a professional’.” Another teacher talked about the governor’s attempt to veto an early retirement bill for teachers as part of a general “anti-teacher attitude.” Gary said this sends a mixed message to teachers: “On the one hand, [it] is saying we can’t afford to lose veteran teachers... at this point, and on the other hand, they are saying the teachers are causing low scores on the MCAS and should be tested or fired.”

Two teachers, Gary and Natalie, also expressed concern over the state’s attempts at diminishing the teachers’ role in the MCAS scoring process. These teachers interpreted these changes as a message from the state that teachers’ input was not to be valued. Gary regarded the teachers’ limited role in scoring the long compositions this way: “We thought we were only being used as tokens [scorers].” There was a growing feeling amongst the teachers I interviewed that the state makes a show of using “token” teacher input, when in fact, real classroom teachers have very little say about the shape and delivery of the test. The test development committee is composed mostly of administrators, not teachers, and only table leaders’ opinions seem to count for the testing company.

In a sense, teachers perceived these school, district, state educational changes and mandates as all working in concert to eradicate teacher power. Some teachers felt as if

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10 For the first three years of MCAS, Massachusetts teachers were the ones primarily responsible for scoring the long compositions of the English Language Arts MCAS tests. Over the years, this responsibility has been farmed out to people other than teachers. The summer I interviewed these teachers, they reported that the new testing company, Harcourt Educational Measurement, had hired retired military personnel to correct whatever long compositions the Massachusetts teachers did not correct. Moreover, the state had changed the rules regarding the professional development points (PDPs) teachers could earn by correcting MCAS. They are no longer automatically given to teacher-scorers. Rather, teachers now have to demonstrate that they presented a workshop or seminar to their colleagues in order to earn PDPs.
they no longer had control over what and how they taught students, and how they assessed them. They felt as if they the new pathways to recertification were restricting. They felt as if whatever say they, as teachers, had over the scoring process was being eroded, slipping from their grasp. And, according to some teachers the state, and in some cases district and school personnel, were sending a plethora of messages that what they thought and did as teachers was no longer valued. As a result, teachers began to question whether or not teaching is a profession. When Tom and Judy, as well as Natalie and Rich, compared their teaching to other occupations, they concluded that the current state reform efforts have made them feel less professional.

In commenting on the nature of the teaching profession, Ashton and Webb (1986) state that many teachers enter the profession with certain aspirations, but these aspirations are eroded in a variety of ways. These methods of erosion include the realization that teachers do not necessarily have a respectable high status in the community, and that prestige is damaged by media reports of poor schools, unqualified teachers, and a general decline in the public’s confidence in education. In commenting on how MCAS undermined his own sense of professionalism, Rich echoed some of the same findings that Ashton and Webb (1986) report:

Teachers aren’t really [in] a profession....It isn’t a profession like being a doctor or a dentist. You don’t get substitute dentists. If your dentist is out sick, you don’t get somebody in for $50 a day to work on your teeth, do you?....But, if [teachers] are sick, you should see—because it is a prosperous economy—the people we get to take over our classes. It is unbelievable....We are not paid as a professional is paid....I feel there is this perception that, “Anybody can do this...[and], the people who are doing it right now are really incompetent, stupid and lazy and disinterested in education. And, they are...ruining everything for the rest of us, and now it is time to get these charter schools and anybody can teach in those....Let’s just give up on public education.”
In using self-referential words like “stupid” and “lazy,” Rich typifies the deep frustrations teachers feel about the lack of respect for their work.

Complying out of Fear and Threats

Whether or not the teachers perceived the curriculum frameworks and MCAS as helpful guides or controlling mandates, they reported that they complied with the state’s wishes by preparing students for the MCAS test (see Chapter Four for details). In making MCAS a high-stakes test, the state legislators and policymakers built a system of rewards and sanctions into the equation. Throughout the interviews, the teachers explained that they were motivated to comply for three main reasons: (a) they feared what would happen to their students if they, as teachers, did not take MCAS seriously; (b) they feared further restrictions on their work; (c) and, they feared the state’s promise of sanctions. Furthermore, teachers reported that these fears stemmed from very real threats from the governor, the Board of Education, legislators, and policymakers. For all the participants in this study, these fears were a constant reminder that they were in a powerless position.

Fears for students. Teachers were very clear about their understanding of the stakes for students. Although five teachers stated that the MCAS test would motivate students to perform better in school, 14 out of 16 participants said that MCAS could “hurt kids.” As Tom stated, “I am more afraid of some poor kid being victimized by this test.” These 14 teachers, even those who found MCAS to be positive in other ways, worried about the students who would not be able to pass MCAS in the tenth grade. Seven teachers expressed concern over their students dropping out of school. For example, Tricia stated,
Some of [the students] said, “If I fail this exam, I am dropping out.” ... I would say a good third at some point over the years expressed ... fear of failing the MCAS, and [they said] if they do, they are going to drop out. ... They can’t [make that connection that they can take the test again]. They can’t make it at all. I have even had a few—maybe one percent—say [that] when they get their results [from] the eighth grade [MCAS]. ... I hate handing them out because they are like, “Why am I in school? Why am I here? I should just go home.” They are defeated already.

Seven participants questioned what will happen to students who are denied a diploma. For example, Judy stated, “[If] you deny him a diploma, he has no access to anything outside of school.” Similarly, Rich explained how, even though many of his vocational students would not pass MCAS, they learn valuable skills for their future employment in high school:

[It used to be that] everyone in town who didn’t go off to be a lawyer or a doctor went to this factory, made a good living wage, and had vacation time. ... People were able to buy their houses and buy cars, and they knew that they had that job coming out of high school. ... That was the lynchpin, the center, the economic cornerstone of the communities out here, and [now] all these companies have gone, ... and so there is this huge void. ... To take that place ... they get this secondary education to help them find jobs that would have been comparable. [The students seek] technical jobs and service jobs, but not flipping burgers or bagging groceries, something that you can have some pride in and you can make some money at. In fact, a lot of these kids, ... if they follow that track [of learning a trade and completing high school], they will make more money than I will make as a school teacher ... with a master’s degree.

Rich’s summation of his vocational students’ possible future is laced with a deep sense of disappointment that this teacher feels about the diminishing opportunities ahead of them. He is deeply concerned that his students will just be shut out of these potentially lucrative job preparation activities if they fail to pass the MCAS test.

Nine participants also expressed concern about the emotional effects on students. Rich said that failing MCAS will damage the students’ self esteem, and Ramón said it will unnecessarily label students. Ramón lamented,
The political system and the cultural emphasis [on MCAS] are going to put red Ms... on the chest of people who don’t pass the MCAS... [like] The Scarlet M.... Do you really make the kids suffer [that way]? ... Do you really take educational reform towards the path of intensifying the consequences, the negative consequences of the red M?

Ramón’s statements about how the consequences for students are too great are similar to those of other teachers. With the exception of one participant, the teachers all pointed to SPED, vocational, and bilingual education students as the students who have the least chance of passing MCAS. Yet, they stated that there was little they could do to help these—and all—students pass MCAS other than do their best to prepare them. Ultimately, it was these fears for their students, which forced some teachers to comply with the state’s wishes. As Mary stated,

Well, if the point is to reform education in order to line it up with the MCAS, you don’t have much of a choice. It is a state mandate.... Schools are going to put a lot of pressure on their teachers to reform.... I don’t think you can escape it now.... If [state officials] walked in, and [said], “Here are frameworks.... We would really appreciate if you guys tried to align with [them],” schools aren’t going to do that. You have got to have the accountability at the end, and the accountability at the end is the test, and the accountability is for students, it is for teachers, it is for schools.... The state spent a lot of money on these frameworks and on this test, and they want to ensure that you take it seriously, and they are doing it by tying it to graduation.... We are forced to take it seriously,... and I think teachers are taking it very seriously too [because] I don’t think we have the choice.

Fear of further control. Just as Mary accepted the dictum that the test is the ultimate measure of accountability, other teachers reported that they feared the state would constrain them even further if they did not comply with MCAS mandates. Half the teachers fear specifically that the state would exert even more control over what they do in their classrooms. Rich, Judy, and Tricia stated that they feared their entire curriculum would be devoted “strictly [to] teaching to the test.” Similarly, Anne stated,
“I feel it will control us, rather than guide us.” Mary expressed her fears about government interference as follows:

I guess I would be afraid that it would try and control and take over, and I as the teacher would not have any say about what happens in my classroom, [and that] everything [would be] state mandated. It can be a real fragile area to get into... when someone else comes into your classroom and starts mandating what you do in your classroom on a large [scale]. [It is scary when] some government force comes into your classroom and says, “This is what you will teach. This is when you will teach it. This is how you will teach it.”... That would be my fear. That is not happening now, but things have a tendency to [happen]. Things can get scary like that when this government body thinks they know what is best for all, and then goes out and implements it.

Even though four teachers declared that they were not personally threatened in the sense that they would not be fired, three teachers did explain that they were prepared in the event that someone from the state challenged them on what they did. In fact, one participant, Ben, spoke about the local “curriculum police” in his district.

Ramón explained that one of his fears was that MCAS as a high-stakes test would usurp the importance of everything else in the classroom:

My major fear is that... turning... [a school’s efforts] towards high stakes basically makes the high stakes the primary motivator for... education, and [it] subsumes everything else—self interest, self motivation, the possibility of free, well-informed flowing self expression, the capability of participating in a gathered discussion, [and] the possibility of articulating disagreement. It makes all those things secondary to how effectively you deal with the high stakes. And, it makes everything you do in terms of the educational system kind of [a] slavish response, either towards receiving the high rewards or avoiding the consequences, of the high stakes. And, it devalues anything that may be of worth [in] the process of getting an education.

Ramón is concerned about the ways MCAS could constrict what teachers do in the classroom. At the same time, however, he addresses a more global issue. Ramón’s discussion of the diminished importance of “open discussion” and “articulating
disagreement” strikes at the very core of a democratic education. His reference to “free…self expression” hints at the importance of America’s foundational freedoms as they are filtered through our educational system.

Responding to sanctions. The apprehension that the teachers expressed concerning further state control was, in a sense, fear of the unknown. Nonetheless, teachers’ responses to state sanctions were more imminent and real to them. Furthermore, these sanctions were powerful enough to force teachers to follow state policies regarding MCAS. Throughout the interviews, all teachers related stories about specific sanctions with which the state threatened teachers. The one that seemed to be central in their minds was the threat of being tested. This was a very real threat to teachers because in 2000 the Board of Education established a requirement for all math teachers in underperforming schools to be tested in their content area. The purpose of this teacher testing is to determine whether or not the teachers were knowledgeable enough in the subject matter to prepare their students to pass MCAS. Although currently this requirement does not apply to English teachers, many feared that it could become a reality for them. Mary expressed her concerns about being tested as follows:

I think [that] if the scores come back poorly, it is going to fall on us. Obviously, it will be our responsibility, because “The teachers aren’t doing their jobs, because look at the MCAS scores. Well, let’s go test teachers then. Let’s see what they know.”…I don’t know every obscure author that there is out there. I haven’t read every piece of literature out there….I have never read The Grapes of Wrath. Does that make me incapable of teaching it? No, because I know how to read literature….And, I am afraid….Are we going to test all current teachers now? Like when we go for re-certification every five years, are we going

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11 On May 23, 2000, the Massachusetts Board of Education adopted the regulations for their diagnostic assessment of math teachers. This test will be given to mathematics teachers in middle and high schools where more than 30 percent of the students fail the MCAS mathematics test. The Board stated that they will exclude SPED and ESL students as well as students who have not spent at least two years in the school in their calculations of failing rates (Massachusetts BOE, 2000c).
to have to take a test as well? I could just see that in the papers, and I
could just see people getting crucified. And, I can see teachers becoming
very depressed and very sad.... I think I would be nervous that they would
want to test me to keep my job because, like any job, you get
specialized.... But, if they just sat me down in front of a test and said, “We
are going to test you on your knowledge of Old and Middle English
writings,” I would probably fail because I haven’t taught that in a long
time. I haven’t taken it [since the] late 80s [or] early 90s. That is almost
ten years that I haven’t even looked at that material. Of course I don’t
know it right now, but I have learned it, and I am familiar with it. If... I
was going to teach it, obviously I would go and review it and not just try
to walk into a class and do it.... But, that is what I would be afraid of.
What would be lost is that [it] wouldn’t be made obvious that I have
professionalism... [to] say, “Yes you go and you research and you relearn
[the] information before you teach it.”

Mary said that she was “afraid” and that she could see teachers getting “crucified” and
“becoming depressed.” Her words resound with the threat of sanctions, which push her
to prepare students to do well on MCAS. At the same time, Mary’s story reveals that
these sanctions make her question and defend her sense of professionalism and
capability. She says that there is more to being an English teacher than demonstrating
that one can recall information from a list of books.

Eleven out of 16 participants responded to other possible state sanctions, such as
denying funding to schools that continue to perform poorly on MCAS, state audits, and
state takeovers. In fact, three teachers labeled these efforts “Orwellian.” For example,
Sydney stated,

I find that frightening. I find the thought of teachers being taken over by
the state to feel kind of 1984ish. Big Brother’s coming in.... It feels like a
new version of McCarthyism. It feels like a witch hunt. It really does
because no one’s talking about the emperor who’s not wearing any
clothes. No one’s pointing out... the homes that these kids are coming
from, and the lack of prior knowledge they arrive in school with.

Sydney’s comments about “Big Brother” are not necessarily off the mark, when one
considers Ben’s story of how he was audited by the state:
I was audited by the state for my professional development. I got a certified letter, and I had 30 days to show documentation of my points. I have 2,500 points. I only needed a 120. In response to this request I submitted all of it, and I said, "You sort it out." And, I asked how I was selected, and they said, "You were selected by a random process." And, I said, "Can I have an explanation of that random process? Because I don't believe it was random." I remember having mouthed off at a lot of state conferences on how unfair this [MCAS] is to vocational ed [students], and I think somebody said, "Let's check his points," and that is the way these people have operated... It is just nasty.

Moreover, on one of the days in which I interviewed Ben, he told me that the state had just announced it would take over one of the middle schools in his district. Ben explained what a takeover means:

I don't know if you read the papers today, but the state has threatened to take over one of our middle schools... because it is chronically underperforming. The school will have to come up with a plan in six months to raise scores by a certain percentage, like two percent or four percent, each year, and the state says it will provide extra help. At the end of the two years if you haven't reached that goal, the state takes over the school. At that point, they may hire or fire the principal, and they may go in and hire and fire teachers at will. Now, they have these teams in place, and they have to do something, so somebody has to be the scapegoat. I would say that my school would be next... When you look at our population and you look at the way the [test] numbers of these kids are every year... our scores are going to go down. I guarantee it will happen.

Ben stated that he thinks his school will be taken over because of the type of students he teaches. According to statistics provided by the Massachusetts Department of Education, approximately 79 percent of the students in Ben's school are minorities, with most of them being second language learners, and over 75 percent of students in his school failed the 1999 grade 10 English Language Arts MCAS test. Ben, as well as five other teachers of disadvantaged students, said they believe the state is deliberately targeting schools with large populations of disadvantaged students. Teachers who teach in these schools reported feeling these threats more often. Yet, Gary, Mike, Ramón and
Matthew, who teach advantaged students in schools with high MCAS scores recognized that their students’ performance exempted them from some of these sanctions. They acknowledged that they were in a fortunate place, and may have felt more personally threatened if they worked in an urban school district. Mike, who teaches in a well-to-do suburban setting, explained this as follows:

There is a schedule for improvement. Schools have to improve a certain amount...if they don’t want to get in trouble with the state....I expressed my skepticism that this would ever happen,...that we were going to get audited, and we were going to get into big trouble if our scores didn’t improve to a certain degree. Come get me coppers! They are not really going to start bugging [my suburban school]. [They are not] really worried about [my school’s] lack of improvement. I think they have a lot of other people [they will] pick on before they get to [us]. [They will] pick on all the people in [the urban schools], all those places, where they can, where the targets are easy....It’s basically punishing people for their disadvantages. And, then the whole idea...[of] cutting funding to the schools that aren’t doing well so then they will want to improve more...is absurd....Every time they pick on education, what do they hold up as an example of typical education? It is not my town. They don’t say, “This is your town. Your town is doing a terrible job.” They don’t say that to me....They say it to places where there are different variables in those kids’ lives than in ours. It is easy to do. Every time they talk about how bad a high school is,...where is it? Urban [schools]. It is easy to prove things there.

All of these externally mandated threats and sanctions, combined with the very real stakes for students, only added another layer of disempowerment for teachers.

According to the teachers in this study, these factors force them to act in ways that the state wants them to act. That is, if teachers do not want these fears to become a reality and if they do not want to be sanctioned in ways that the state is threatening, they have little choice but to do what the state orders them to do.
Blaming, Bashing, and Beating Up Teachers as a Method of Silencing

Just as teachers reported feeling that state (and at times local) officials have robbed them of their ability to make professional decisions, they also felt as if their image, public reputation, and thus their credibility had been damaged. All of the teachers in this study, whether or not they testified they were empowered in other ways, stated repeatedly that they felt like "a scapegoat" who has been "blamed," "bashed," "beaten up," "abused," "victimized," "targeted," "disrespected," and "undermined." The teachers explained that the primary reason they felt that way was that the entire national standards movement and state reform efforts—including MCAS—have been debated in public forums, where in most cases teachers were blamed for a host of educational failures. In fact, in my interview with Jeff Nelhaus, the Director of Assessments and Evaluation Services for the Massachusetts DOE, he stated that MCAS would have "public scrutiny and exposure." And, part of the stakes attached to MCAS test scores are that they are reported and compared publicly.

In the interviews, all teachers stated or implied that they recognized the public nature of these reform movements, and they talked about how they as teachers have been characterized in the media. For example, Gary stated,

I’m really upset about [this one newspaper], not only their editorials, which I think are anti-teacher, but their...columnist who’s been writing about...public education...I mean, slamming....What really caused a lot of letters to be written was when he said that...public school teachers are from...the middle or lower levels of their college class, you know, they’re the worst students in college. And, that’s totally and completely false. That’s a completely false statement, and yet he makes it. He says things like, “Studies have shown (laugh) public school teachers are...”....Some of the most brilliant people I know are high school teachers....I think most of them were high achieving students. Most of the teachers I know were on the Dean’s List....Then, [this columnist] makes a statement like that,....and combine that with Cellucci’s attitude, and it just creates a real
negative environment for teachers...I'm just surprised [young, new teachers] are actually going into this field...with all this horrible publicity [and] public relations...I give them a lot of credit. A while ago, when I started teaching, teaching was considered an honorable profession by the public...You were sort of looked up to....Yeah, back in the 60s I don't remember encountering real negative anti-teacher campaigns in the press or politically...I don't ever recall experiencing that. I was active in the union too. I was president [or] director of the union and on the state union board. We were always fighting the fight for better working conditions and pay, but we never had this horrible political atmosphere we have now.

In his statement, Gary pointed to the media and the governor as the ones primarily responsible for the negative press; all the teachers, however, added members of the Department of Education, legislators, politicians, townspeople, students' parents, family, friends, and the general public to this list of people who were blaming teachers.

Moreover, the teachers explained that what they are being blamed for in these public forums is (a) the general decline in education and (b) students' failure rate on standardized tests, which include the MCAS test. A good example of the teachers' analysis of blame is as follows: "Too many people are laying failure on teachers, many of whom have been doing this job for a long time, and doing it very successfully...This decline in scores and this supposed failure of our educational system is not because of teachers."

The teachers in this study stated that for them the consequence of this "blame game" was a damaged reputation. Nowhere is the wound of their tarnished image more aptly described than in their own words:

Definitely part of the identity of an educator is to feel like you are under fire...People don't like the job you are doing, and [the] MCAS test is one of those things that people are firing at you.(Mike).

I see MCAS saying, "Look we have all these stupid teachers whom we have been paying $20,000 a year in an economy where the minimum wage should be about $40,000 [for teachers], and they are not doing their job."
I mean, you have heard it as well as I all over the place. "Give the teachers their raises based on the scores." It is unbelievable. (Tom).

I think that the public has now decided that we must not be teaching well if so many students are failing. (Sydney).

[When I first started teaching] everyone from the administration to the public supported and believed in teachers, and I think now the bad press has made it seem as if people weren't doing the job that I think most teachers have always done quite well. (Anne).

[In the] media, it is always the teachers; it is always the teachers. "The teachers are awful." (Diane).

Teacher bashing in this state has sunk to an all-time low between [what] Governor Cellucci in his infinite, high wisdom has done and said about and concerning teachers, and the legislation he has introduced....I think [this] has dragged the profession of teacher not only through the mud, but through the sewage pit. (Don).

There is a small portion of my professionalism where I wonder if the public is looking at educators as not being competent. "If all these children are doing poorly on the test, then you are not doing your job." (Tricia).

When you've been in the profession for 30 or so years, and you think you've done a pretty good job, you know you've gotten a lot of accolades and everything, and then somebody points the finger at you, at your profession as a whole, and says, "You people aren't doing a good job,"...it makes you feel bad. It's depressing. (Gary).

One negative thing is I see this in some not-so-subtle ways as [crapping] on teachers. If kids don't do well on MCAS, [it's] because they have got [terrible] teachers, and the kids that do well have good teachers....I am a little put off by that notion that I am not in there really working hard, and doing a pretty good job with the kids I have. (Rich).

It is not affecting me as much in my teaching as it is just outside and the irritation of...[being] bashed, and put down, and seen as the problem. (Ethan).

These statements demonstrate that the stakes involved with MCAS are not just for the students. There are high-stakes for the teachers as well. Anne explained this as follows:
"I think if you listen to authority, in this case [of MCAS], that this isn’t a test of students. This is a test of teachers in public schools."

According to the participants, they feel “victimized” by the accusations that they are failing their students. They find it “insulting” and “demoralizing” to have their image unjustly smeared in public. Gary, Mary, and Natalie reported that they were forced to defend themselves and their profession to their family and friends. Gary’s story illustrates this:

It’s put me on the defensive...with other people who are not teachers. And, I’m just tired of defending the profession and defending myself. I don’t think I should have to do that. I think the public as a whole has joined in this finger-pointing against the teachers....Yeah, I’ve encountered people who say, “Well, what do you think about the MCAS scores? What’s wrong with the schools?” And, you know, I have to explain and defend, and I shouldn’t have to do that. Where did they get that idea? They got it from the press, from Cellucci [that] there’s something wrong. There’s nothing wrong with the schools. Schools are doing a good job. The vast majority of teachers are doing a good job....Who else would know better? Unless somebody is in the profession, unless you know what you’re doing with the kids, what you’re teaching them, whether they’re going to college, what colleges they’re getting into [you may not know teachers are doing a good job]. They’re coming back and telling you they’re doing well... You know you’re doing a good job. You know your school is preparing the kids well.

Although teachers, like Gary, lamented having to defend themselves, they admitted that they and other teachers have taken little formal action\textsuperscript{12} to correct their damaged reputation. As Tom stated,

The thing that gets me is that the whole “profession” has folded up its tents and run off into the night. There is no protest movement. You hear [some protest], but it is not coming from the teachers. The teachers are saying they think it is fine....I think that...historically teachers are a flock of sheep. They do what they are told to do, and they run at the sight of the first bullet. I don’t see a lot of outrage in the teachers. I think teachers know it is a dishonest contraption, but they are not very interested in voicing that, I don’t think.

\textsuperscript{12} Two teachers, Tom and Rich, did report that they had signed an anti-MCAS petition.
Why have the teachers refused, as Tom states, to “protest” and voice their “outrage”? Part of the answer to that could lie in Ethan’s analysis: “The state…[has] much stronger spin doctors than we do….If your whole [job] is to try to manipulate people for political gain, then you are going to be pretty good at it.” Ethan explained that the state officials have more access to and control over the medium in which these damaged reputations are made. According to Ethan, making these types of disparaging comments against teachers is part of a state official’s job. It is not part of a teacher’s job. Moreover, Ethan’s comment implies that by virtue of their position, these state officials, in conjunction with the media, hold the power to control the public’s perception of teachers. Don confirms this idea when he stated, “Does the MCAS have an effect? Yeah, it has the effect of bringing more publicity out….What kind of publicity is it? Most of it is bad simply because of the people who are in power. [They have] the position of power…to make things either better or worse for people like me.”

Because of the teachers’ perceived lack of power to present the public with a different point of view, or because they have learned that their point of view does not count, these forces rendered them silent. Diane’s experience highlights how this silencing could occur. She stated that policymakers “don’t want to hear about any concerns, and if they do...let you talk, it is obvious they are not listening, and then they move along [to] their own agenda.” One way Michelle Fine (1991) defines silencing is calling it a “fear of talk,” which “signifies a terror of words” (p. 32). She also states that it is important to investigate in what ways silencing is institutionalized. Rich’s story highlights the ways in which MCAS as a high-stakes test has succeeded in producing in
teachers a “fear of talk,” and it also reveals the ways in which, as Fine states, silencing is institutionalized.

Sometimes I have felt like calling up the media and taking the test outside and burning it in the parking lot. I know it would be my job, and that would be it....I haven’t done [it]. I would love to do that though. I just think there should be some real serious teacher demonstration against this thing, and I wish I had the courage to do it because I just see how destructive [MCAS] is. But then again, the community would say that, “That’s a tech school, and they have got dumb kids, and they are worried about their jobs because they can’t teach those kids. They don’t know how to teach them so they are blaming it on the test.” You just can’t win. I think it is a real tough situation.

Rich’s story is quite telling. He stated that he clearly wanted to protest, and he wanted to voice his concerns about MCAS to the media. Yet, he did not do either out of fear for his job and lack of “courage.” More importantly, Rich did not bother to voice his concerns because he anticipated how the “community” would respond—“they can’t teach those kids,” “they don’t know how to teach them,” “they are blaming it on the test.” The overpowering barrage of negative publicity teachers had already received extinguished whatever spark Rich had to protest. In a sense, his credibility as one who should know about how “destructive” MCAS is was lost; it had been consumed by more and stronger voices. In stating, “You just can’t win,” Rich resigned himself to a state of silence.

Consequences of Disempowerment and Damaged Identities

So what are the consequences of the teachers’ feelings of disempowerment and damaged identity? The participants in this study reported a number of consequences, many of which mirror the research literature on the emotional effects of high-stakes testing. As other research shows (Hall & Klein, 1992; Herman, Abedi & Golan, 1994; Koretz et al., 1996; Shannon, 1986), 15 out of the 16 participants reported that they experienced some type of pressure to ensure that their students pass MCAS. This seemed
to be a common experience among all the participants; yet, as is consistent with Lomax et al. (1995), teachers who worked with disadvantaged students felt the most pressure to increase scores for two reasons. First, they felt that their students had minimal chance of passing MCAS, and therefore, these students would not graduate from high school. The second reason these teachers felt more pressure was related to their administration’s heavy-handed response to MCAS. That is, the teachers in primarily urban schools—for example, Judy and Ben—reported more instances where their administrators placed restriction on their curricular, pedagogical, and assessment practices. Nonetheless, much like other research studies, the 15 teachers felt that much of the pressure they experienced came from outside their schools, and stemmed from the ways in which the scores were reported. The participants pointed to state officials, parents, the public, and the media as the cause of the pressure they experienced.

As a result of these pressures and the forces behind the pressures, the teachers explained that they experienced a great deal of low morale, which is also consistent with the research literature (for example, Brown, 1992; Cooper & Davies, 1993; Smith, 1991a). They said they felt “demoralized,” “anxious,” “abused,” “victimized,” and “disrespected.” Natalie’s comments show how she felt devalued:

When I first started to teach, I felt very respected by parents,... by people in my community, by [the] school committee, by my own administration. I felt respected. I was proud to be a teacher. Now I feel as though I have to explain myself and prove to them that I am doing a good job,... and it is like we have taken a nosedive in everyone’s view, and I reject that.... Why do we not value the people to whom we entrust our children?... It is the job with the most impact on society, and the one least appreciated.

Moreover, several teachers stated that their general attitude about their work had declined and that they lost some of the joys associated with their job:
[A colleague] and I were just talking the other day, and she...said, “That is one thing I like about you. You haven’t changed, except you [have gotten] a little grumpier.” And, I said, “You have too, you know.” And, I think we have gotten worse because we are doing a lot of things that we don’t believe in, that are being dictated down to us, all this accountability. Our lives have gotten a lot more—I don’t want to say miserable—that is too strong a word, [but] when you have got people looking over shoulder all the time and breathing down your back, it is not as pleasant a job as it used to be....Yeah, teaching isn’t as fun as it [once was]. There is very little fun left in school. (Ben)

It is hard to remain a positive teacher and be happy with what you are doing when every day people are insulting you. (Mary)

[I was] less fearful beforehand, definitely. (Tricia)

[It is now] depressing. Everybody walks around saying, “We used to have fun around here. We used to be able to do our own thing within the framework. We had a lot of academic freedom within our curriculum.” So everybody got to do a curriculum in the way that they were comfortable, the way that they were happy doing it, which I think is important. (Judy)

I had fun when I started teaching. A lot of us were talking about that. You know, we really enjoyed it. We got the job done. I think we did a good job, but god, it just seems so less enjoyable a job today, I guess, than it was when I started. The anxiety level has risen considerably. (Gary)

Research has shown that teachers’ commitment to their profession is extremely important in that if they are not committed to the profession, they will not be motivated to perform well in the classroom (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Fuller et al., 1982; Rosenholtz, 1989). Teachers are key figures in any educational system. In a sense, if the teachers are not motivated, then there is a potential for learning to diminish or cease all together. This, in turn, could jeopardize the entire educational system.

In addition to a change in teachers’ attitudes about their work in general, five teachers described how they became “deskilled” educators (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Smith, 1991b). Judy’s experience highlights this deskilling process:
[I fear] lack of freedom, lack of creativity. [MCAS] is going to make me the kind of teacher that I don’t want to be. I love being able to get these kids to click on different levels, and I am just hitting my stride [now in my career]. I just figured out that I can teach across the curriculum, which Reform says to do, and that I can touch bases with a lot of different subjects, that I can combine a lot of different skills and come out and show them how English just overlaps with everything that they do. I just had this for a little while, and now I am being reduced to something less than what I can be because I will give up fighting and say, “It’s easier to do what they want me to do.” It is so much easier to say, “Give me this. I will teach to the test. I will give them this kind of question. I will give them five paragraph essay writing.” My life will be very easy because when I am in the middle of a project, I am a nervous wreck trying to make everything come together. [Now with MCAS] I can just go punch—punch in and be a little robot, and do everything that they want me to do.

In some ways, the effects of MCAS seem to compound one another. The pressure teachers experienced led to low morale, which in turn caused some teachers to want to leave the profession. This experience was especially true for the more experienced veteran teachers. Six participants talked about how they or their colleagues wanted out of teaching. For example, Matthew talked about the experiences of the veteran teachers with whom he worked: “All the teachers that were retiring this year were saying, ‘Thank god I don’t have to deal with MCAS,’ and ‘What a relief it’s going to be. There will be no pressures on me.’... [Those] who are retiring are talking about what a relief it will be that they won’t have to deal with this big test.” One of the most compelling stories about how MCAS has negatively affected a veteran teacher is Gary’s story:

This whole furor about MCAS and finger-pointing at teachers and testing math teachers has affected me to the point that this is the first year I have ever thought about retiring seriously. A lot of us have.... And, it isn’t the kids we have for classes; it’s the whole political atmosphere.... I’m ready to retire in two years, and I’m looking forward to it.... You can get hammered as a professional only for so long before it starts to have an effect on you, a negative effect.... I’m proud of what I’ve done. On the other hand,.... it’s left a bad taste in my mouth, the way [the governor] has handled it politically. I won’t be sorry to go in two years. Who knows?
Otherwise, if we had had a different governor or a different way I might have stayed on. I might not have been looking toward retirement. We are all pretty much fed up this year. I’ve never heard so many teachers talking about retirement and focusing on [and] obsessing about the early retirement bill. It’s been incredible…Cellucci is right in that respect. He might lose a ton of teachers….But, we’re not getting out early because we don’t like the job or the profession. I think most of us are tired of being made scapegoats by politicians, the government especially, and the press. I’m tired of being put on the defensive, being treated without respect. I think that’s what got to most of us, most of the veteran teachers, I think.

Matthew stated that his colleagues are glad to retire because they do not want to deal with the pressures surrounding MCAS. Gary, on the other hand, is fed up with the “finger-pointing” and “the whole political atmosphere.” What both of these teachers are saying is that teachers are not leaving the profession because of the students or what they do in their classrooms. Judy echoes these sentiments as follows: “It is not [because of] my kids that I would want out. It is all this other crap that drives me crazy. My kids drive me crazy, but I don’t hate that. I don’t hate coming to work. I don’t hate being in front of my classroom, and I don’t hate teaching. But, it is when I walk out…and I get bombarded by all kinds of people with all kinds of opinions that I fear.” Part of the call from proponents of education reform has been for recruiting qualified, effective teachers. Yet, what happens to the competent (and sometimes excellent) teachers that are already working with students? According to these veteran teachers, they feel as if the state is covertly pushing them out like putting retired racehorses to pasture.

Summary of Findings

The effects of MCAS on teachers’ professional identity are complex. How can one educational reform effort simultaneously empower and disempower teachers? How can one test both positively affect and negatively affect a teacher’s professional identity?
One answer is that MCAS is not simply a test. It really has two faces: MCAS as a test instrument and MCAS as a high-stakes test that is connected to a host of other educational policies.

Some of the teachers in this study reported that MCAS had a positive influence on their professional identity. These teachers explained that MCAS as a test instrument and MCAS as a font of professional opportunities provided them with authority they previously did not have. First, MCAS as a test sanctioned the work they did in their classrooms because their curricula, instruction, and assessment practices mirrored what the test did. As Natalie said, MCAS and her teaching practices were "a natural marriage." This validation in turn gave these English teachers more credibility among their colleagues and students. These participants reported that their status as English teachers was heightened. Moreover, MCAS provided teachers a multitude of new professional opportunities that did not exist before MCAS. Teachers served on committees, tutored students in MCAS preparation courses, taught professional development workshops for their peers, and scored the MCAS tests. Not only did these opportunities provide them with extra income, it made these teachers feel valued as professionals, enhancing their identity as professional educators.

Unfortunately, most teachers in this study did not experience the empowering effects of MCAS. In fact, MCAS as a high-stakes test had the opposite effect. It stripped them of whatever authority they had and it shattered their professional identity. Teachers reported that the top-down efforts of the state to impose curriculum frameworks and a specific, high-stakes, standardized test left them feeling as if they had little autonomy in their classrooms. Furthermore, the threat of controls and sanctions made teachers feel as
if they had little choice but to conform to the state mandates and policies. The teachers explained that these efforts—coupled with other educational reform efforts—made them feel devalued. Even more significant was teachers’ perception that the state campaigned to smear their good name and public reputation. Teachers reported feeling blamed, bashed, and beaten up by state officials, the press, parents, and the public as a whole. They felt as if they had little power to answer any of the accusations against them, and ultimately they reported feeling silenced by the damaging rhetoric. The result of all these controlling efforts was that teachers felt pressure, had low morale, and some even wanted to leave the profession all together.

Concluding Comments

One explanation of why teachers felt frustrated by the control, sanctions, and public characterizations of them is that they did not feel these efforts were warranted, nor did they match their own experiences as teachers. Throughout the interviews, the teachers stated that they were doing good work, that they were making progress with their students, and that students were demonstrating successful performance in a variety of ways. The teachers did not feel that these reform efforts were necessary, as they clearly stated that they were not to be blamed for whatever educational deficiencies might exist. Not surprisingly, these teachers had their own theories of what or who was to blame for the current state of education. In the next chapter, I explore the teachers’ understanding of the motives behind the current educational reform efforts, their perceptions of the socio-political underpinnings of these efforts, and their own analysis of the current state of education in Massachusetts.
CHAPTER 6

TEACHERS’ SOCIO-POLITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE THEORIES THAT GUIDE STANDARDS-BASED REFORM, THE MOTIVES BEHIND MCAS, AND THE CURRENT STATE OF EDUCATION

Introduction

It is clear that the teachers see MCAS as rooted in politics and connected with wider social issues. For the teachers, this debate centers on the accusations of their and public education’s ineffectiveness. They refuted the proof that many politicians, legislators, policymakers, and public citizens furnish regarding their shortcomings. The teachers in this study argued against the supposed decline of international test scores and SAT scores, which many feel leave the United States vulnerable to fiscal takeover; against anecdotal asides that students are just not as smart as they used to be; against the notion that second language learners are failing to learn English; and against the common belief high school students are just not as prepared as they should be for the job market. The participants furthered the debate by providing their understanding of the motives for implementing this high-stakes test, and by explaining their perceptions of the current state of education in this country.

In speaking about how John Dewey, Antonio Gramsci, and Paolo Freire made the “political more pedagogical,” Stanley Aronowitz and Henry A. Giroux (1993) state,

We invent a language of possibility that proposes extensive philosophic and programmatic changes in education only if we can imagine a public sphere within which alternatives are seriously considered. Epistemologically, the language of critique turns on itself and loses emancipatory character when political imagination has disappeared. The theorist becomes overwhelmed by the immediate circumstances which, admittedly, since the early 1970s have become unfavorable to such proposals. On the other hand, the failure of the theorist to find a field to “test” such proposals simply strengthens the hegemony of conservatives who today have their field to themselves. Part of the job is to establish
In the first two sections of this chapter, the participants in my study speak a “language of possibility” and “engage in the debate” referred to by Aronowitz and Giroux. Through these interviews the participants have found a “field to test” their “political imagination” and a sphere in which to consider the socio-political meanings of enforced high-stakes testing. At the same time, the teachers’ “language of critique”—specifically their critique of the current state of education—“turns on itself and loses emancipatory character.” As disempowered teachers, it is clear that they have become “overwhelmed by the immediate circumstances” of MCAS and turn their critique around in a way that locates the problems with education in factors other than themselves.

Disputing Theories that Guide Standards-based Reform

The majority of the teachers in this study do not buy into the “education has declined” theory, or that they are ineffective, or that implementing content and performance standards are a way to improve education. With the exception of three participants, the teachers all stated that they, themselves, were effective teachers who were making great strides with their students. Furthermore, nine of the 16 participants spoke at length about one or more of the theories that guide the national standards movement, of which MCAS is a part. In fact, three of the participants—Mike, Tom, and Matthew—said that these theories are simply based on a bunch of myths. These myths were described to me as follows:
Myth Number One: America Will No Longer Be Competitive Internationally If Education Is Not Improved

Five teachers dissected the logic behind the need for educational reform and high-stakes testing based on the idea that the United States will lose its international competitive edge, in light of U.S. students' lukewarm performance on national and international test scores. Tom explains his logic as follows:

It is the old capitalist myth that got knocked around during the 90s [that] the Japanese are taking over the world, and we are stupid now, and our school system is a bunch of baloney....America has never been more prosperous during this time when apparently our educational system is so hopelessly [messed] up....All of this is built on hysteria and myth, and it ends up punishing innocent people....Well, in some ways...MCAS is asking that you take the kids who can’t do anything and make them candidates for admission to MIT or Harvard....Part of the underlying assumption is that somehow people in this society are not getting it, and the Japanese are going to get ahead of us, and they are going to bury us financially....All that brouhaha in the early 90s was just...rhetoric....[MCAS is based on the idea that] America wants to stay on top, and somehow...there are certain people who are going to keep us from being on top, and they are people who don’t know how to read and write English, and the people that can’t do mathematical problems well. It is a fascist formula as to who is going to make [and] keep America the powerful country....Where is the evidence [that we need educational reform]? Who economically is running the world?....Who is running the world, which is the only thing that we care about? [So what that we were] seventh in math and science [on international tests]. Big deal. Where are all the science labs? Where does the Nobel Prize go every year? A couple in Europe, and then America, America, America....Big deal. The Japanese throw all their lower classes out of high school as do most of the Europeans, and they test the top 20 percent, and their scores are lovely naturally. We are educating everyone, which is the moral [thing to do]. If America has any claim to being moral, there it is in universal public education.

Mike presented a similar analysis:

[Proponents of the national standards movement and MCAS believe that] Americans will not be competitive if we continue on the path we are on. Let’s look around at the economies right now. People were saying that 20 years ago when Japan was on top, [but] who even questioned America’s dominance? Have we had any substantial changes in education? Things
[in education] have been the way they are [now], and our economy is fine. So, really America is not losing a competitive edge due to education, and, in fact, we don’t even look like we are standing to lose [any] competitive edge. Another thing everybody presented was the TIMMS [Third International Measurement of Mathematics and Science] test....The problem with that test was the sampling that took place. In some countries, kids don’t get to go to school that would not do well on the test. And, it was suggested that kids in a few places selected particular groups, like in Japan, to do that. So I really didn’t find any evidence...to prove that there was a problem in education.

Similarly, Gary argued that using test scores to compare students’ performance in different countries is not valid evidence that the U.S. educational system has declined.

He stated, “[You can’t compare] the United States with all these homogenous societies, where [the people] are all the same race, or they’re practically all of the same culture....We’re a totally different society.”

In the same vein, Judy and Ethan said that they thought education reform proponents’ use of SAT scores to indicate a decline in American education was false.

Ethan explained that politicians typically neglect statistics showing that SAT and other test scores have increased over the past 70 years. Judy stated,

I think we are educating more kids at different levels than ever before in our country and in any other country in the world. You can’t compare what our kids do with anybody else because we are educating everybody....[Proponents of the standards movement] compare our math SAT scores, [and say] they went down. Again, when I went to school, or even the generation after me, only the crème de la crème took the SATs. You didn’t take the SATs if you were in business or...in general classes, so I think this is all false statistics....I think, yeah, scores look lower because we are keeping kids in school longer, and yeah, we are educating all these kids.

Judy, Mike, and Tom each stated that there is no proof that the current state of education in this country in any way threatens the country’s competitive edge. Rich
concurred with the idea that there is nothing wrong with the country’s educational system when he stated,

[Proponents of education reform] tell me teenagers are dumber now, and kids can’t add and can’t write the way we could when we were kids, which is not true....If our kids are so dumb, and our colleges have dumbed down so much, [then] why do all the [people in] other countries in the world want to go to college in the United States? People aren’t racing to go to college in Europe and Asia [and] Africa. They are all coming here....I don’t buy it.

Myth Number Two: Students Are Not Getting the Same Quality Education They Received in Days Gone By

Both Rich and Judy addressed what they considered as the myth that students today are not getting the same quality education they received in the past. Half of the participants agreed, saying “[the] education crisis is possibly non-existent.” For example, Mary said, “Learning is happening in the classroom, and just because it is not happening in a way that [politicians] think it should be happening, [it does not mean] that it is [not] happening.” And, Rich explained,

[If you] listen to the talk shows...or read the newspaper, [you will]...hear all this anecdotal [evidence] about how kids are so dumb. [Yet,] kids are really smart. Kids are much more sophisticated than I was when I was their age. They know more...culturally, [and] they are much more mature in many ways. They write better. They write much more [than I did, and] they write with more quality [of style].

Like Rich, Tom stated that his students are receiving a better education than he did in high school, and that those who think otherwise buy into what he called the myth of the Golden Age:

It was the myth of the Golden Age...[and, that] was so wonderful [then]....[But,] there was no Golden Age....I really believe that there is much in education now that is immensely better than it was in the Golden Age—whenever you want to believe the Golden Age is. People believe the Golden Age was when they were in high school, whether it was in the middle 70s, the middle 60s, the middle 50s, or the middle 40s, and that
somehow their education was fantastic and what is going on now is appallingly wretched. That is silly....[People] believe that there was a Golden Age in the 1950s, when people studied Latin, and if you got a high school diploma, it really meant something. The problem in that [argument] for me is that [when] I graduated in 1957, a third of my classmates couldn’t read and write. I had written maybe 15 or 20 pages of writing in four years [of high school]....My least talented English students [now] have written 60 pages their freshmen year and typed them and talked to me about them and revised them. So, in many ways I see the turn of [this] century [as] being a Renaissance rather than a [time when students are failing educationally].

Tom continued by stating that this myth has been perpetuated throughout this country’s educational history.

When was the time when the educational system was right? The answer to that...rhetorical question is never. Things have never been right. You go back and read [old newspapers] in the mid 19th century of [when] people [were] complaining about the educational system. [And, these complaints read like they are] right out of today’s New York Times or the Boston Globe. The people are still saying the same things.

Ben continued this same theme: “I can show you newspaper clippings from the 20s where [people] are arguing about what kids should learn...and again, it is the same arguments [as today]....Depending upon the economy and depending on what is going on historically in the world, this view of education is always going to rumble back and forth.”

Myth Number Three: A High-Stakes Test Will Motivate Students to Learn and Will Ultimately Make Students Happy and Successful

Proponents of high-stakes testing argue that these assessments and the threat of sanctions, if certain scores are not achieved, will drive effective pedagogy, which, in turn, will lead to student success (for example, Ravitch, 1995). Although some teachers stated that MCAS will help motivate students to learn, seven teachers said that high-stakes testing will not motivate students to want to learn, nor will it help make them happy and
successful. Ramón explained that the idea of using a high-stakes test to motivate students is misplaced:

[With] the MCAS, you are making the high-stakes [threat] a machine to make people feel like education is more about complying with state directions than about seeking adequate exciting, interesting, [and] productive ways of self expression, of numerical manipulation, of historical knowledge, [or] of artistic endeavor. And so, [the aim of] the high stakes [test will require students to jump] through the hoops to either achieve the high rewards or avoid the hard knocks, [which then] becomes the fruit of education.

Ramon also stated that a high-stakes test promotes a “policing” mentality, and when learning “gets terribly restricted, unproductive, and police-like, kids drop out.”

Other participants said that the end result of MCAS will be that students will become so frustrated with the educational system, that they will drop out, and learning will cease. For example, Ben said, “[Students] are just not going to go to school and put up with the hassle [of MCAS, especially] if there is no hope of passing. Who would do that?”

Rich explained that for his vocational students, MCAS has no real meaning for their lives and thus is not a motivational factor. He explained,

It is a tech school. [The students] are taking motors apart, they are baking cakes, they are doing child care, they are doing hair-dos—nicely I might say, on elderly women who come into the school. Some of them do wonderfully [when they graduate]. They are going to make some money, and they are going to be happy—as happy as life can get ....And, it is not going to have anything to do with how well they did on the MCAS test. It just isn’t. There is no correlation between success in life and passing the MCAS.

Mike explained that the idea of using a high-stakes test to motivate students (and teachers) is based on a corporate or capitalistic model of education reform, and thus it is flawed:

I think our country follows basically a corporate model [for educational reform]. People want a profit line. They think education will improve if
you have a bottom line, which the tests are supposed to be. I think that is what MCAS is doing. It is part of this corporate, capitalist idea that if you make everybody compete, if you give them a bottom line that they have to beat, then everything will be productive...[and], education will work like it is supposed to....The main reason [this model won't work is] because I think MCAS scores are not a matter of learning. I think you are just going to keep getting a distribution [of scores]. I don’t think everybody is going [to] get up to [a high level of achievement]....Everybody is not going to get the same score. It is not Lake Woebegone where all the children are above average....[The state wanting improvements every year] is totally insane....That is the business model. Every year a business is supposed to make more money [just like MCAS scores are supposed to be raised every year]....I just think it is so unrealistic.

Myth Number Four: Standards-Based Reform and High-Stakes Testing Will “Level the Playing Field”

Through the course of the interviews, six teachers disputed the theory that MCAS will act as a catalyst for equalizing education and society by holding all kids accountable to the same standards. Matthew and Mike said that this premise would not work to improve education because they believed that K-12 schooling is not really the great equalizer. As Matthew explained,

I don’t think that...having...standards is going to change things because I don’t necessarily...think that schools are these great equalizers. [I don’t believe] that if you just make great schools, everything else is going to be wonderful, and the kids will automatically have a ticket into the road to success....Schools can’t carry that kind of burden....[The students are] only there a few hours a day. They’ve already had all of these experiences by the time they get there....The school can’t do everything for them to elevate them that much.

Six teachers pointed to specific socio-cultural inequities that all or some of their students experience, thus making the educational playing field impossible to level, at least by a test. These teachers stated that some students start school academically behind their peers. Ben summarized some of what the other participants stated when he said:

“Don’t ever claim that it is a level playing field because it isn’t.....A lot of the things that
this test measures upper middle class kids get just because of their environment and their background.”

Judy and Ben explained that their students who are second language learners are disadvantaged on MCAS because of socio-linguistic and socio-cultural reasons. In fact, Judy said that MCAS is a “double whammy” for her second language learners. Ben concurred,

Seventy percent of the kids in the school are non-native English speakers....They don’t have an abstract vocabulary....A middle class kid is born with a 100 yard advantage in a 200 yard race. That is just the way it is when you add in the poverty, and add in the environment they come from, and then...throw in the language issue.

Ethan relates success on MCAS to the financial success of the students’ parents, and their parents’ ability to provide for such things as proper daycare for their children before these students even start school. Rich, likewise, relates students’ performance on MCAS to wider socio-economic and cultural issues:

[Governor] Cellucci keeps saying, “All students have to take this test....This is equal access that is going to raise the bar for everyone.”....But, of course, if [the students] are black, Latino or poor...white, they are not going to [get equal access to education]. It starts right at the beginning [of these students’ lives]. They are poor, so they live in a poor community. The poor communities have the poorest schools,...the fewest resources, [and] they have the biggest turnover of teachers....You go to [the inner cities, and you will see that] there are still some pretty rotten schools physically. That might not necessarily make a difference, but I think it does. So, say [even if] you are pouring money into these poor communities, [and that] they have the new textbooks, and they have the computers, I am still a little dubious if that is actually happening....[Assuming] it is [happening]...these kids still come from a culture that is not [as] literate, and where they are not getting the same advantages that middle class kids get at home. And, they are bringing that to school....It starts from very early on....A lot of it comes from illiteracy [and] just being aware of what the opportunities are. I was much more aware...of what is out there than say people who are real poor [living] in rural or urban settings....It just seems logical to me that the only way to improve schools is to improve...[the students’] home life, [and]...the only
way to improve home life is to redistribute the wealth of this country, so
that people start off with the same advantages and disadvantages. [That
would mean that the students] are all playing...on the same field [and] that
the field is level.

The teachers of disadvantaged students are not the only ones who believe
performance on MCAS is related to more than teaching and learning, and that MCAS
cannot possibly equalize opportunities for students. Matthew, who works in a wealthy
district, stated that his students are ahead educationally because their parents provide
them with “cultural capital.” He said,

If you just look at the [test] scores, and you just look at the towns where
they spend all the money and the kids are wealthy, [those students] do well
[on MCAS]...[because of] cultural enrichment [experiences, and these
experiences give them] cultural capital....Forced culture is what the kids
always say what their parents try to give them. They’ll take them to
Gettysburg for the summer...instead of just to the beach....[Success on
MCAS is] all by income. If you look at the state statistics [on MCAS
scores, poor inner city schools are] on the bottom. I think that cultural
capital goes a long way,...[and] it’s not necessarily per pupil expenditure.
It’s certainly not because we have a low per pupil expenditure. It’s
just...all the other [experiences] that they’ve had, and just the attitudes
about...success that make those kids do better [on standardized tests] than
the kids that grow up in [inner cities]....Everyone just takes it for granted
that they’re going to do well, [and] that they’re going to go to college and
so forth.

Ben, Anne, Judy, and Rich argued that MCAS is not at all about providing
students equal access and that MCAS is really an abuse of the equal access law. For
example, Anne stated that, because this test indicates a certain level of ability, many
special needs students will not pass. Thus, the dropout rate will increase. Similarly, Ben
explained that because the state requires all students, including second language learners
and special education students, to take MCAS, the state has done a disservice to many
students:
It’s a classic case of Catch-22. We go through all this effort to make accommodations for special education and bilingual kids in science, math, and so forth, but if you make any accommodations on the English test, the kid automatically fails....I can read them the social studies test, but I can’t read them the English test. Guess which part [the students] are going to pass? So, the whole thing is a mean-spirited reverse use of the equal access law....[The state officials said,] “Oh no, everybody is taking this test. We are not denying anyone [access to the same materials and instruction]”....In the beginning it was so absurd that [we] had teachers reading to kids on gurneys—[kids] who were profoundly deaf and dumb....Some of what [the state officials] have done is criminal.

Teachers like Ben think making all students take a test like MCAS is illogical. For some students with learning disabilities that hamper their ability to read and write, MCAS is not a test of what they know and can do. Rather, it is a test of what they are unable to do. If one examines the statistics of special needs students’ performance on the 2000 MCAS test, one will see that 70 percent of the students with disabilities failed the tenth grade English Language Arts MCAS test, while only 25 percent of the students not identified as having disabilities failed.

Teachers’ Analysis of the Motives Behind MCAS

MCAS as a Genuine Motive to Improve Education

Of the 16 participants in this study, Sydney, Diane, Anne, and Natalie believed that the state legislators and Department of Education (DOE) had altruistic motives for instituting MCAS as a way to improve education, and these participants agreed that MCAS was a necessity. For example, Anne stated, “I...think there are people who just want to make public schools work. I do think there are people who are sincere and honest, and [who] believe that having a common [educational goal] will help.” Diane agreed when she stated, “What [the state officials] are really talking about [are]...inner
city kids… They don’t want inner city [students] to continue the cycle of poverty. They want inner city kids to have knowledge so they can go on and get good jobs. They want inner city kids to learn English.” Further, Diane pointed specifically to the need to help Latino students:

If you do any kind of research on minorities [and] their success rate as far as education goes, you are going to find the numbers appalling. With the Latino population growing at the rate it is growing in this country, we do need to do something to educate this population. We need to somehow… send the message that their children need to be educated. We need to do that as a country, because… in order to compete as a country, we need to have educated people…. So standards are very, very necessary…. On the other hand, we [have] a lot of people here who can’t meet the standard because of language or [lack of] previous skills. Only now, it matters…. I think when we had the exodus from Europe, [when] the Poles, and the Irish and [other immigrants] came over,… we had an industrial society. There were lots of… manual labor jobs, and education wasn’t as important as it is today…. [Now with] the whole global society, … if you are going to compete, especially in a computer driven world, you are going to need that abstract reasoning.

Sydney echoed some of Diane’s concerns about students needing certain knowledge for the job market:

In our technical world, the skill set has to be so much higher than it ever used to be, and there are so few jobs now that you can work [in] successfully and make enough money to raise a family on a long-term basis…. The kids that we teach don’t understand that…. It’s not like there [are] a whole bunch of factory jobs out there where you can make $10 an hour. The factory jobs are hard to find and usually technically-oriented…. If you can’t follow directions in school and you can’t read well enough, you’re not going to be able to get those jobs. The manual labor jobs do not pay anymore, or those that do are pretty hard to find.

Natalie, Sydney, and Diane believed that there were problems with the current state of education and that the state officials who legislated and implemented MCAS did so for good reasons. For example, Natalie stated that grade inflation had become a problem in this country, and that students were not reading the way that they should. She
also said that grade inflation had led to the advent of a meaningless diploma. Moreover, both Sydney and Diane talked about the “gaps” in the students’ knowledge. Diane described these gaps as follows:

When I talk about gaps, I talk about the major gaps [such as] cultural things that seem to be so obvious to us that these kids don’t know about. They don’t know who the Beatles are. They don’t know where Boston is. They don’t know that Hartford is...to our south. They can’t point in which direction the Atlantic Ocean is. They don’t know....So when you are dealing with that, you’re suddenly at a real loss to start talking about ideas because they have such little general...mainstream cultural knowledge....When you are dealing with that kind of a population [and] when you start talking about standards and you start talking about complex thought, [you discover] these kids have no thoughts....They don’t put two and two together and get four. They don’t even understand the concept of putting two and two together.

According to Sydney and Diane, their students are lacking some fundamental knowledge and skills required to function successfully in the more “global” workforce. They seem to present the “proof” that MCAS is needed for the betterment of students and society. At the same time, these two teachers raise some important questions about the knowledge that is most important for students’ future success in life. As Diane discussed, many students lack what Hirsch (1987) would call “cultural literacy.” Not knowing basic geographical locations or the name of a rock group might possibly disadvantage students. Yet, these arguments represent a “deficit” view of students’ knowledge and learning capabilities (Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1999). Research shows that students have a great deal of cultural knowledge that is never acknowledged, drawn out, or used to move students forward in their learning in mainstream public schools (Heath, 1983). Sonia Nieto states that learning is “the reproduction of socially sanctioned knowledge” (p.4), which means that Sydney and Diane’s students may have knowledge that is not sanctioned by the larger social world of the school. Therefore, students’
unsanctioned knowledge never gets privileged in school, nor is it assessed on a test like the MCAS test.

MCAS as a Motive to Save the Taxpayer Money

Participants such as Ben, Diane, and Matthew state that MCAS is an attempt to save the state taxpayer’s money by targeting expensive state programs. For example, Diane said, “The state is spending most money on social services [and] on education, and I think the cities want to stop that.” Like Diane, Mike explained that the state was spending too much money on special education programs, and that MCAS would weed students out of these programs by forcing them to drop out of school. Furthermore, Mike stated that this movement to decrease funding for special education programs started with discontented parents, and Ben said that special education programs were not the only programs targeted by the high-stakes testing requirement.

MCAS targets three expensive programs—bilingual ed[ucation], special ed[ucation] and vocational education….I think, in Massachusetts anyway, you will find [that the] population of special education and minority students in vocational education has grown quite a bit in the last 20 years….It is kind of like we can get them all with one [MCAS] bullet…. [The state is now saying], “So, you want to be an electrician? Okay, then go to [a] community college”….They want to put the vocational education up to [where] middle class white kids will get [it because they are more able to pay the community college tuition] and deny it to these kids, deny it to the special education kids.

According to Ben, MCAS, in targeting three expensive educational programs—SPED, ESL/bilingual education, and vocational education—will make it so difficult to pass high school that these students will become frustrated and drop out of school, leaving more money for mainstream students, particularly those in suburban schools.

Diane had another theory of how MCAS will save the taxpayers some money. She stated that MCAS is connected to welfare changes in that students’ test scores will
become part of a large networked database, where people in social services will be able to view students’ records and make decisions about allotting social services and welfare money based on students’ performance of MCAS. If students are denied a diploma based on MCAS, it will send a message to them to either get out of Massachusetts or stay away. The message will be there are no free rides in Massachusetts. She explains her theory as follows:

My private theory is that when the [state government] got rid of welfare, they were hoping that they would get rid of the minorities and the people who were living off of welfare. And, I believe that MCAS is just another way of doing that....They are going to refuse services to people whose [children] do not go to school [and/or who] do not perform [well] on the MCAS test....In fact, we already have that kind of refusal. There is something on the books that says if your child is not attending school, then you won't receive your services....We are going to start refusing to give diplomas to kids who do not pass the MCAS test, [that is,] minorities in the inner cities. The state already knows that,...and so it is sending a message: “[If] you can’t make it, get out because we are not going to give you a diploma, and we are not going to let you stay on welfare either. So, bye.”....[Minorities are] being told, “Don’t come to Massachusetts, because you have to pass this test, and this test is awful, and you are not going to be able to pass it.”

Finally, teachers question the amount of money allocated to the MCAS test development and the scoring process ($76 million). Tom expressed concern that the MCAS test is developed and controlled by a profit-seeking testing company, unlike the SATs, which are constructed by the Educational Testing Service, a non-profit company. Don and Judy state that all the money being spent on MCAS could be better spent on resources and teachers’ salaries, thereby improving the quality of education.

Classist and Racist Motives

With the exception of three participants—Ramón, Natalie, and Mary—all the teachers in this study linked MCAS on some level to racism and classism. In fact, several
participants told stories as Diane told above about how MCAS is intended to send a message to minorities to get or stay out of Massachusetts. Sydney told a story very similar to the one Diane told. She stated that, although she does not believe the people behind MCAS are deliberately plotting to rid Massachusetts of minorities, it could be an unintentional consequence. Seven teachers stated that because so many poor and minority students will not pass MCAS this method of evaluation simply punishes students for their social station, their race, or their cultural heritage. Moreover, these teachers stated that those who have made these classist and racist educational policies are able to punish the poor and minorities because they lack the social and cultural power to fight these policies. Some of these teachers’ comments are as follows:

I think it is classist [and] racist….It is a complete fakery as far as I am concerned….The kids going to college are going to go to college whether they do well on the MCAS or not. They will certainly pass it enough to get their diploma. The kids that don’t pass it are denied a diploma, and they are the only segment of the high school population [for whom] a high school diploma has any meaning. It has no meaning to kids going on to school….It is going to punish the bottom rung of a classist society, and it is destructive. I consider it to be immoral on that basis. (Tom)

What [Governor] Cellucci thinks is “Let’s cut funding to the schools that aren’t doing well so then they will want to improve more.” It is absurd. It is just a perfect example of a bunch of political people using minorities as an example [because] they are easy to kick around. [These minorities] don’t really have a say in things as much as like a white middle class member would, and so it is easy to pick on them. (Mike)

There isn’t anything that my students will gain from [MCAS] other than perhaps…reinforcing that life isn’t fair….Is that a gain?….They might gain more awareness of their class setting when they read the papers. Many of our kids don’t understand class. They don’t realize that they are [part of the] middle class, working class, [or] underclass….This test will help them understand…their place in society….Obviously, all of this is sarcastic because I don’t think they will gain anything [from MCAS]. (Rich)
These and other teachers stated that the motives behind MCAS are racist and classist because MCAS scores fall along socioeconomic lines; that is, students in wealthy, primarily white, middle class, suburban school districts outperform students in districts where students are poor, and primarily minority and lower/working class. Rich explained this as follows:

[The scores] all break down demographically. I knew this already before I saw it [in the newspaper]. The *Boston Globe* had a list the first year or second year of the MCAS...[with] the top grades right down to the bottom grades, and then the average annual income next to it....It was seamless. It was an absolute match. The lower [the scores] go, the lower the income. What is the big mystery here? Why are some schools not performing? Because they are poor, and they have a poor population....It all has to do with class. Everything does, especially education.

Five teachers stated that since the low MCAS scores correlated with class and race, this would provide people with the justification to stereotype minorities and poor people. For example, Anne stated, “For those people who want to say that people of certain races or ethnicities are just not as smart [as they are], this will just give them...fuel for the fire.” Judy stated, “They want [my inner city school] to be a failure. They want it to fail. Why? Because we teach Puerto Ricans.” Rich, likewise, discussed how MCAS would justify stereotypes about his students.

[MCAS] means that a certain segment of the student population is going to be punished...for being poor, for being black or Latino [or] Asian....The politicians know this and really don’t care because it justifies [their] stereotypes of these people. You have a working class kid, [or] a poor kid coming out of an inner city that doesn’t do well on his test, and everyone can say, “See, they are not as smart as we are. They can’t...learn. They don’t want to learn, and their teachers are lousy. So, let’s continue to give that school district no money.”

These teachers believe that the impact of MCAS will further stratify the population socially. Anne and Tom explain how MCAS solidifies a class system:
Americans are in denial that we have a class system, and I think [MCAS] will help perpetuate it... I think [high stakes testing] creates a system of winners and losers, which is something that some people thrive on. You want to live in the district that wins so that property values will be higher in the district that wins. I think there are a lot of socioeconomic issues that people don’t talk about... when they say that... [a school] has low scores. I think that they over simplify why they have low scores, and they want to blame it on poor teaching [or other things] when it is [a] much more systematic and much wider issue that, as Americans in a democratic society, we would prefer not to look at. (Anne)

[MCAS] is [about asking] how do we sort people out socially? “There are all these people that don’t read English, that don’t spell [well], that don’t know the difference between an adjective and an adverb, that don’t know how to do math problems,... so we have got to sort these people out... so that the corporate capitalist machine can tell who to hire and who not to hire.” I think it... can be all be read in Marxist terms... that it is a class war. (Tom)

Motive to Remain in Power and Control Knowledge

When the teachers talked about how they believed the motive for implementing this high-stakes testing requirement was racist and classist, they also discussed issues of power, hegemony, and a backlash against liberalism in American education. In particular, six teachers seem to be saying that MCAS is a reaction against bilingual education and opening up the literary canon to include multicultural literature. They stated that part of what has motivated people to implement a high-stakes testing requirement is that the people in the dominant groups—that is, the white, Anglo-Saxon, middle to upper middle class people—want to remain in the power positions to make decisions about what they think is best for education and even society. These participants explained that the methods are either coercive (via the stakes attached to MCAS) or hegemonic (via blind public consent of the high-stake policy).

First, the teachers specifically described those who are making the educational policy decisions regarding MCAS as white, Anglo-Saxon, and male. For example, Diane
said that the people in power who want to “whip [the students] into shape” are coming from “a white perspective about what we need to do.” Similarly, Judy said that the people in power “want the white, Anglo-Saxon [to be] supreme in this country.”

Furthermore, the teachers explained that the people in power determine what knowledge, language, and skills are desirable and acceptable, which creates a cyclical guarantee of staying in power. For example, Ben stated, “Well, if you make up all the rules and you make up the tests that determine who gets... [a diploma], then you are always going to be on top.” Anne concurred with this idea when she said, “When you have what the top few percent of the country has, you also have the ability to control all the moves on the board.” What Ben and Anne described is the ability of persons in power to remain so by implementing a high-stakes testing policy. Anne also talked about how the people in power use hegemonic methods to remain in power and call the shots.

She stated,

The whole hegemonic view of schooling [is evident in the MCAS test]. I sometimes just feel that we are shaped [and] just tossed about like a kite in the wind.... It is really difficult to take control of information [about who wins and who loses under a high-stakes testing policy]. We are kept very busy in our lives, [and]... our lives are just burdened with things [that] we don’t have time to put a lot of deep thought into [it], never mind take action.... I mean there is a theory out there that if you keep the folks down there busy with issues of racism and sexism and drugs [they won’t pay attention to those with the power].

According to the participants, whether the people in power use coercive or hegemonic methods to remain in power, they have managed to dictate what is to be valued educationally and socially. In their analysis, Ben, Tom, Rich, and Judy point to the things that the people in power value and promote. Judy stated that those in power want to create an elitist educational system:
I know what their motives are... I think it is a right wing objective to ruin public education or to change public education as we know it. I think it is an elitist effort. [The state officials] brought in advisors from England, and...if you know anything about that European system, [you will know] it is very exclusive system....[The British] give [their students something like] 11 plus exams, and then they tell the kids where to go to school, and only if you are in the right school do you get to the right place. That I find horrifying. To me the greatest thing about education in the USA...is that everybody gets to go to school, and you have to go until you are 16....I really resent what [the people who make the educational decisions] are trying [to do]. They are changing...the essence of what we have been about for over 200 years—a land of opportunity for all....They want the white Anglo Saxon [to be] supreme in this country, and that is damn scary.

Ben and Diane explain that those in power are reacting negatively to the recent educational movements that welcomed multiculturalism and believed in bilingual education. In fact, Ben stated, “This whole backlashing of liberalism is in everything.”

Diane explained this backlash against liberal education as follows:

I do [think that it is kind of a conspiracy to keep the middle class white man in power]. Yes, I do. I have seen it in attitudes of my friends...[and] people who are just part of the [educational] system....[These people] are angry at affirmative action....I have seen it here within this system [with] older white males making some really vocal complaints because they are not able to move up in a system that is promoting multiculturalism. [These men call it] a reverse discrimination, and there is a lot of complaining about that....They are saying that [people] are hiring incompetent people because they are minorities, that they are hiring people for the wrong reasons, [that] they are giving them very good jobs, and that the white males are being excluded because they are white males.

Like Diane, Ben stated that many people in power resent minorities, particularly minorities for whom English is not their first language:

I definitely think [MCAS is] part of the conservative movement [towards] English-only. [These conservatives] are smart enough not to come right out and say it, but when [they] say that [students] have to take this highly literate test with three years of ESL instruction, basically [they] are saying English-only. And, it has already started. The push is on to move kids out of ESL and bilingual classes....Believe it or not at [my school we] had a two-way bilingual program at one point. It is so political right now [that] that is not likely to happen [again].
According to Ben, those in power want to privilege English as the primary instructional language. Rich and Tom state that in addition to dictating that instruction should take place in the English language, they are also privileging a particular type of English. For example, Rich discussed how powerful people in the media berate students for their poor grammatical skills. Similarly, Tom talked about how people who hold a place of privilege complain that students do not know how to spell, which, he said, is simply an arbitrary convention created by people in power (Clark & Ivanic, 1997). Tom explains this as follows:

I remember once I was at one of my niece’s weddings, … and there was this prissy little secretary sitting across [from me]…. The word got out that I was an English teacher, so she sniffed and started complaining about [how] nobody knows how to spell any more. I said, “I don’t know how to spell very well either,” and I said “There is the whole notion coming along… that you have to take people’s level of communication from where they are stationed.”… After all, spelling is arbitrarily decided upon. It is not a real thing. C-A-T is not real, except that you and I agree it is. So philosophically, grammar and spelling are all just arbitrary things where a certain class defines all other classes on their ability to meet this or not…. The fact that one of my kids can’t spell scissors and I can [really does not mean much more than] I am Mr. Piss Pot Intelligent, and I belong to a class that knows how to spell scissors. This kid doesn’t [and probably] never will. In fact, it doesn’t mean a… thing. The kid may know 10 times of what I know in terms of technology [or] carpentry. The canon is always established by those people on the top, and in some ways, it is established to keep all the people below that line right where they belong.

Motive for Political Gains

One consistent finding among all the participants in this study is that all teachers stated that, in part, the motive behind implementing this high-stakes exam was political. In fact, several teachers such as Tom, Judy, Natalie, and Rich stated that MCAS is a "political football." For example, Natalie said,
Politicians are trying to get a lot of mileage out of this education issue, and it is being kicked back and forth the way a football could be, as an issue from one politician to the other... Or, to extend the metaphor, the best defense is a good offense....If you are constantly attacking the educational system, you might be deflecting a little attention from what you are doing.

Rich explained his conception of MCAS as a political football as follows:

[MCAS] is a political football....To me it means [MCAS] is a political instrument,...a football...that you pass around....I think Cellucci...sees himself as the quarterback, and he has got this football—this MCAS thing—and he is in charge....[Cellucci] has got control, and he has been passing this football on to schools and,...he is saying they had better catch it. If they drop it, he is going to come in take over the school....He wants to get rid of teachers who can't catch this so-called football.

Throughout the interviews, nine teachers often stated that they think the general anti-teacher attitude in the press and otherwise is directly connected to the politicians trying to score politically with the teacher bashing rhetoric. (See Chapter Five for more details on teacher bashing.) These teachers stated that MCAS is an easy platform for politicians to attract parents and voters because people care about the issue of educating their children; they are concerned, and therefore it is easy to manipulate them by using the press and media to make everyone think that MCAS will be the thing that will save education. For example, Mike stated, “I think we are in a situation now where the politicians are pushing—and especially Cellucci and the conservatives are pushing—for these tests...to prove [that] public education is bad...because I don’t think they agree with the idea of public education at all. And maybe they are scoring some points somewhere politically.”

In fact, one teacher stated that if scores do increase, the DOE and politicians would take all the credit: “I am...confident that when the tests come out next year, they are going to be much better than they have been before....I am very confident that the politicians and
the Department of Education [are] going to take credit for it instead of the teachers saying,... ‘We have been doing this all along’.”

Because all 16 teachers see this standards movement and MCAS as politically motivated, they all spend a great deal of time characterizing the key state political players surrounding MCAS. For example, five teachers characterized former Governor Cellucci as someone who hates teachers, points the finger of blame at teachers for educational failures, and encourages the press and general public to point the finger of blame as well. Mary and Tom stated that the former governor likes the idea that he is the savior of education: “Cellucci is acting as if he has saved the public schools by imposing all [these requirements].”

Participants often call former Governor Cellucci a liar with no real understanding of what teachers do or about the difficulty of MCAS. For example, Rich stated, “[The rhetoric about how teachers are ruining schools] is all from the same political fabric I think. It is just another set of misconceptions, half truths, and lies, [or] outright lies for political expediency foisted on us by Cellucci and his cronies. And, I just think it makes for real good political hay.” Some teachers such as Mike, Ben, and Tom believe that Cellucci is more interested in fiscal issues—that is, saving the taxpayers some money—than he is in genuinely reforming education as is evidenced in what Ben stated: “Cellucci is dying to cut the education budget so [he can say], ‘See that we gave [urban schools] money, and they blew it. They mismanaged the funds’.” Only one participant had anything good to say about the former governor. Ramón was reluctant to attack Cellucci’s reputation because, as a teacher in a charter school, he saw the former governor as somewhat of an ally:
The Weld-Cellucci phenomenon represents a terrific ambivalent [position for me] because...the Weld-Cellucci administration [made] charter schools possible, and at some level we have to be thought of as political allies on that strand of thinking. But, when it comes to the MCAS, there are a whole range of things that I don’t feel particularly comfortable going along with.

Furthermore, teachers stated that they wanted the former governor and his colleagues to come into their classrooms, see what they do as teachers, see what kids are like, and understand that true teaching and learning are occurring. For example, Sydney said,

[I want the governor and the people at the DOE] to get out of their meeting rooms,...[and] get out of [their suburbs and suburban schools]. They’ve got to go to inner city schools on a regular basis and see what people are dealing with....They...need to sit in classrooms, [and] not make a passing visit, like...[a] queen proceeds through her kingdom. They need to just get out of their little groups and individually go sit in the back of the room, at least one hour every week, minimum, [of] a middle...or high school [in an] inner city...so that they can hear the responses, and [learn that] people aren’t showing off and trotting out their best lessons....They need a reality check of what it is they’re asking. They need to see what we’re dealing with, and I’m not saying that we need to change the standards, and I’m not saying that we need to put MCAS aside, but they have to know that it’s not the teachers.

With few exceptions, the participants lump the legislators, politicians, and members of the DOE, and BOE together with their opinions of the former governor. The majority of teachers see all of these parties as people motivated by politics, making decisions on political whims, and interpreting the law however they wish. To the teachers, this is evidenced by a deliberate disregard for the part of the Ed Reform Law that calls for multiple assessments, not a one-shot test. Therefore, all the teachers reported some distrust of the people making these decisions. Don explained his disgust with the politicians’ disregard for the law as follows: “[The use of multiple assessment] is written into the Ed Reform Act. It is right there....The people who wrote the law knew that any one test should not be the sole determining factor, no matter how good a test it is.”
Some teachers such as Ben and Diane even claimed that the DOE changes the rules regarding MCAS or they withhold certain information about the test. Ben stated that nothing regarding education reform has been consistent since its conception.

Moreover, he believes that the state officials play with the scoring scale every year:

“They play with the scale. Trust me. We answered more questions [right] across the state...[in] language arts, [and] our raw score was higher across the state, yet we all did worse. What happened? [They] moved the scale.”

Similarly, Diane complained that the teachers were really not privy to the DOE’s plans:

Nobody has really tested to see if [MCAS as a graduation requirement] is going to be the way things are going to go. There is so much discussion that [the state] will never be able to hold back a diploma [if] a kid doesn’t pass the MCAS test.... Nobody knows if that is true or not. Nobody knows....I guess people have watched the state change their minds so many times about things that they just think that this is just one other thing that has come down the pike that is going change.

Five participants felt strongly that former Governor Cellucci, the politicians and members of the DOE are out of touch with what goes on in schools. Judy stated that members of the DOE need to reacquaint themselves with the realities of the high school classroom:

Go back to the classroom and start teaching in the inner city, and get in touch with reality....Probably half [of] their employees are former teachers who fled from the classroom....They are not in touch,...and I think they need to come to an inner city school. They need to teach these kids, [and] they have to stand in front of them. They have got to talk to them and they have got to be here and try to teach them to understand what our problems are. Nobody understands what a teacher’s day is like—nobody—unless you are there....The sad thing is I think...that teachers...once they get out, forget it like a bad dream....I don’t think what comes out of the DOE is at all realistic sometimes. When is the last time the leaders have been in the classroom? Or, did they spend all the time in the classroom getting degrees to get out of the classroom?
Many participants expressed anger that someone who has never been a classroom teacher could have the audacity to tell them how to do their job and to threaten their termination or school takeover if student test scores remain low. These teachers all said that one of the central problems with those making educational decisions is that these people presumed they knew about teaching by virtue of having once been a student.

Mary explains her position as follows:

I think the problem is that everyone thinks they know how to be a teacher because they have been a student. [These people believe that because] they have sat in a classroom, they now have the ability to comment on the professionalism [of teachers] and how teachers should teach because they were students. Well let me tell you, it is a whole different ball game [sitting] in the little desk as opposed to the big desk.... You can’t even compare the two, and people think that they can. Countless people have given me advice on being a teacher, and I am thinking to myself, “When were you a teacher?”...[It would be the equivalent of me having] the audacity...[that] because I was a teller [I would think to advise a bank president] on how to run your bank.

Diane was so fed up with the constant barrage of state threats that she even said she dared someone from the DOE to come into her classroom and show her how to do her job better:

I am doing the best I can, so come on down and show me how I can be better....Come on down, and when Johnny won’t pick his head up off the desk, you show me how you are going to make sure that he is going to pass the MCAS test. Come on. Show me. Show me because I am going to sit here and critique you, Mr. Person from the DOE, who is so smart. As a teacher, I am sick of being blamed for what these kids don’t know because it is not as if they are not being taught.

Finally, five teachers expressed anger over the politics behind MCAS, so much so that they insisted that the governor, policymakers, legislators, members of the DOE and BOE take the MCAS test and have their scores published. For example, Anne stated,

Everyone at the DOE...needs to take the test and have [his or her] score published....I think it is very easy to sit high and mighty and say people
are stupid or people are...needs improvement, and these people are publishing the scores of every town and city. [So.] why not publish their own? [They should do this especially] if they believe in their test. I just think, “Why not put your money where your mouth is? If you believe that this test is good, and fair, and right, and that every student of average ability in the state and even below average ability should be able to pass it, [then] let’s see you do, and let’s publish your scores, and let’s have them on the nightly news, and let’s know where you went to school, and let’s have that reflect on your education.”...I could pretty much guarantee most of them would score a four [or less] on a long composition.

Motive to Promote Vouchers for Private Schools

Six teachers stated that they believe that MCAS is rooted in a conservative, right-winged movement to disparage public education and public school teachers in a effort to gain support for private school vouchers. Ben explained this as follows: “The people behind this [are part of] the conservative...Republican movement [that] wants a lot of things....Deep down inside they want tax credits for sending their kids to private schools. They think they [will] get a better chance at doing that by embarrassing the hell out of public schools.” Furthermore, Anne explained the connection between MCAS and the school voucher movement:

I think it is very political in nature. If we can convince the public that these public school teachers aren’t doing their jobs, we will get funding for private schools....I think if you listen to authority in this case, [they say MCAS] isn’t a test of students; this is a test of teachers in public schools that...if we keep doing the poor job that we are doing, then we should definitely fund private schools, and I think a lot of this goes back to it. The funding for private schools didn’t get a lot of headway in this state, but once they changed the discourse [vouchers received a lot of support]....[Now] I hear people talking about moving their children to private schools because they can’t get a good education, even if it would bankrupt the family. And, I think these are people who really have just bought a bill of goods that doesn’t serve them....I don’t think it is a big conspiracy, but I really do think that many people are misled.

Not only do these teachers believe that the conservative right-wingers are selling the idea that vouchers will save education because the public schools are in such
disrepair, but they also believe as Anne said, that the public is buying this. For example, Tom stated that because of the anti-teacher rhetoric, parents are taking their children out of public school:

I think the bottom [line] is politics....Everyone believes that the schools are [messed] up. Everyone thinks that the teachers are stupid, and they get too much time off; and they are paid too much....It is the rhetoric. It is what sells out there on the TV, [and] it's what people want to hear. The bourgeois parents talk about their kids in the schools. The most liberal are all abandoning the schools and sending their kid East to these little private schools, wherever they can find them....It is all because they believe all this crap.

Moreover, Judy stated that if this voucher movement comes to fruition, inner city public schools will pay a heavy price:

This right-wing agenda is [that] they want to make these inner city schools especially holding cells....[The right-winged politicians] want to kick the [required school] age to 18 in Massachusetts. So we are going to make holding cells for kids that can't do it....At the same time, [they] will give vouchers [to middle class students]....Even with vouchers, poor kids aren't going to go to private school, so you are going to have...poor students and criminals in the inner city [schools], and all the happy little upper [or] middle class...kids are going to get money to help send them to private schools, and that is discrimination.....The civil liberties union should be slapping them silly.

Teachers' Analysis of the Current State of Education

The teachers in this study countered many of the current, popular beliefs about education by providing their own analysis of the current state of education. First, many teachers were quick to say that education today is better than it ever has been. According to Tom and Rich, their students are getting a much better education than they ever did because students write more, read more, analyze literature more deeply, think more critically and reflectively than they did. Gary stated, "Schools are doing a good job. The vast majority of teachers are doing a good job." Matthew, likewise, stated, "The teachers
are really good teachers, and for the most part they care about the kids... We don't have many lame horses in the stable... In this school I think there are just a lot of good solid teachers.” Like Matthew and Gary, Ethan believed that he is making progress with his students, even if no one recognizes his work: “It is a little frustrating. I feel like I am doing a lot of neat things and really helping these kids grow. And, [if] you look outside of here, it seems like we are not doing anything... There is not... any sort of respect or thanks for taking your kids and helping them grow.”

Moreover, in Natalie's experiences in scoring the MCAS tests, she explained that the students are producing some excellent work, demonstrating that teachers are teaching and students are learning:

By and large, [the students] are responding to literature in ways that would drop you backwards. We have hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of books that have come up. So we can’t say teachers aren’t teaching and that curriculum isn’t loaded and loaded with wonderful books [Some of the books students write about are] Their Eyes Are Watching God, War and Peace, [and] modern [and] old classics... We have hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of books that we listed [from the MCAS long composition essays].... We [also] have the ten most often referred to [books, which are]... classics [such as] Great Expectations, To Kill a Mockingbird, Romeo and Juliet, [and] Julius Caesar... They are reading and they are learning and they are studying. We are not bad [teachers].

At the same time, several teachers also stated that they recognize that there are some teachers out there who are doing a poor job, or are lazy, or are not creative, yet the participants were quick to point out that there are ineffective workers in any profession. For example, Natalie stated, “I am not saying that teachers aren’t a part of that picture, but [we all] are not to blame for it. We have some teachers who are less than stellar, the same as any business in the world has employees that are not up to steam.” Similarly, Mary stated,
I think most teachers are doing a good job, just like in any profession. In most professions a majority of the people in that profession do a great job. The Philadelphia Police Department, I am sure for the most part, does a good job, [but] you run into a couple of people that go crazy, and the whole thing gets a bad name. Every student has had a bad teacher. I have had bad teachers. That does not mean that all teachers are bad.

What is important to teachers such as Natalie and Mary is that they do not want to be judged according to the performance of other teachers. Moreover, they and all the other participants do not want to be judged by their students’ performance on MCAS because as Judy stated, “The job of the teacher is to turn a kid on [to reading and writing, not to prepare students for MCAS].” At the same time, the teachers did recognize that there are some problems with the current state of education, and they see these problems as rooted in social ills, students, and parents.

**Locating Educational Problems in Social Ills**

Ten out of 16 teachers discussed at length the social problems that their students face. These teachers painted a nightmarish picture of what some teenagers cope with daily. They talked about how many of their students come from broken homes, have parents who are either alcoholics or drug addicts or are mentally ill. For example, Judy told stories about her students who are in gangs. Natalie asked why her student who has mutilated herself is not interested in English class. Don explained how his students are torn between school and supporting a family. Rich talked about students who have to deal with AIDS. Natalie gave a detailed example of the social problems her students face:

[I have a] student who is sitting here in my English [class] without any food in his stomach [and] doesn’t know where his mother is. She left with her boyfriend last week, and he doesn’t know where she is, and there is no father in the home, and [this student] is living alone in an apartment. How come he is not interested in my prepositions today, do you suppose? How
come he isn’t performing at top level? He probably hasn’t eaten in three
days….We have kids who don’t have any underwear, and I am not trying
to be funny….These kids [live in] incestuous situations, emotionally
abusive situations, sexually abusive situations,…or drugged out situations,
and we want to know how come they are not doing well in
English…. [People will ask,] what is the matter with those teachers? It is
absurd. We have to take a look at what is going on.

Just as Natalie explained how the social problems interfere with her students’ abilities to
learn, Anne explained how the social ills her students deal with daily affect their
performance on MCAS.

I think there are kids with family problems that are really difficult, for
[example]…a kid who lives with a single alcoholic parent [and] who has
to be the one to get [him] out of the bar at midnight and bring [him] home.
We have kids who are molested and assaulted. I have one girl who went
home, [and] walked into her apartment where her mother was laying on
the bed because she had shot herself in the head, and her father had been a
drug addict….I have had another student whose father murdered his
mother. I mean, there are problems in this world that the people who make
up these tests [don’t consider]….The government, they say that is not the
job of the school, but the jobs of the schools are children, and children
come from all different situations….There will be some people who don’t
pass the test because they may have some kind of learning problem,
identified or unidentified. My SPED kids have all kinds of support, [but]
my unidentified [special education] kids—whose parents won’t fight for
them to be in SPED or [kids] who decided in sixth grade that they will
never go to that stupid room—those are kids [who will struggle with
MCAS]….It is not always, but sometimes it is linked to socioeconomic
factors—the stress of poverty, family dysfunction, mental illness. These
are regular parts of people’s lives, and…when you create a test, they don’t
factor [that] in, [and] they don’t allow for…that.

Natalie and Anne as well as other teachers said that MCAS does not take these
issues into consideration, and thus MCAS will not really fix the problems with education.

Tom explained this as follows:

The problems in our educational system are really reflections of deep
societal illnesses like children not having enough to eat [and] like divorce,
but [these illnesses] have nothing really directly to do with school…. [Yet,]
the kids that get sent to us are victims of this stuff, and they don’t perform
well [on standardized tests]. So, to start trying to fix what is wrong with
Locating Educational Problems in Students

As stated in Chapter Five, all of the participants in this study reacted strongly to the politicians, media and general public blaming them for the problems in education. Without exception, the teachers were emphatic that they were not to be blamed. In turn, seven teachers located problems in education in some students. As stated above, Diane related stories of her students' "gaps" in knowledge. And, other teachers pointed to different problems regarding students' lack of educational success. Many teachers, like Diane, couched their comments about students in terms of what they are missing. Sydney, a teacher who works with disadvantaged students, echoed some of Diane's complaints when she said, "You would think in this age of information that they would be arriving with more information, not less, but the information that they're arriving with is not what they need in school." It is not just the teachers who work with low level or disadvantaged students, who feel that students are lacking skills and knowledge when they enter their classrooms. For example, Natalie who works with suburban honors students explained that they were not up to par:

People discount what I personally believe is really at the cause of the decline [in education]. I happen to teach honors students. I have, if you will, the cream of the crop, and they are not as dazzling as they once were. Even the cream of the crop has declined in skill levels, in familiarity with literature, and sheer numbers of books that they have read. And, these are the best kids we have....They are products of a society that no longer puts an emphasis on reading. They are products of families where...in many cases no mom and dad [are] at home to encourage reading or to monitor homework.

Some teachers, like Ben and Judy, attribute educational problems to the students being from non-mainstream cultures. For example, Ben stated that his students, who read
on very low reading levels, lack solid literacy skills and the ability to hear a voice in their heads when they read silently. Natalie, Sydney, Mike, and Don said that some of their students lacked a “value” for education. Don stated that this lack of value for education was evidenced in their poor school attendance: “They don’t want to be in school, and they have shown it on any number of occasions. Simply go and look at an attendance roster.”

Gary and Mike talked about how some students lack, to use Mike’s term, the “innate intelligence” to be successful in school and on MCAS. For example, Gary stated, “First of all, there’s always a percentage... of dumb kids that aren’t going to pass the MCAS, who aren’t going to even ordinarily graduate from high school. I mean, let’s face it, there are some [dumb students, and] you can’t make everybody pass.... That’s been my experience in education. Some kids aren’t cut out for high school.”

Don, Sydney, Natalie, and Mary talked about how their students lack the proper motivation to succeed both in school and on MCAS. For example, in discussing how some students could become “casualties” of MCAS, Mary stated,

I think you can get relatively casualty-free [with MCAS] providing that the causalities don’t want to be casualties.... Just like in high school, there are people who fail, and don’t pass high school, and they don’t care.... If you don’t pass MCAS, maybe you just don’t care, and if you are a casualty maybe you want to be a causality [or] maybe you don’t care if you are casualty.

Other teachers talked about how for some students, academics are not necessarily a priority. For example, Judy stated that for her very poor students,

They come to school for different reasons... because it is [a] free breakfast [or] free lunch. [The school] is warm. It is social. They meet all their friends there, [and] they have a really good time.... They are going to find teachers that care for them, [and who] talk to them. They are not on the street. Some of these kids don’t have coats, or they are living 12 in an
apartment. [So, for those kids, school] is a great wonderful world [to] come to. They are not there for academics a lot of them.

And, Mary echoed some of these concerns:

I think we have to remember that... these are kids, first and foremost. They are 15. They worry about school gossip. They worry about their friends. They worry about, "Should I sleep with him? Is she going to let me touch her? Am I going to smoke cigarettes?" There are so many other things going on in their [lives, and] education isn't first and foremost.

At the same time, many teachers do not think these factors should be an excuse for their lack of interest in academics, and that they need to be held accountable for what they do not know. Tricia explained this as follows:

I presented a question to the students that I took from the social studies portion of the MCAS, and I would say 75 percent of them had no idea what the question meant. They couldn't understand the question, [so] how do you expect them to respond?... Part of me says the questions are poorly written. [Nevertheless,] there is another part that says it is partly the students' fault because I think students need to be held accountable for their learning.

Don, likewise, explained that, at some point, his students need to take responsibility for what they do not know. In talking about how MCAS "victimizes" his students, he twisted his own argument to say,

There's a part of me that says, how come the victim is there in the first place? Should not the victim have said something? Should not the victim have said, "I should not be in tenth grade, [especially] if I look at this [information]... in the tenth grade [curriculum]. I don't understand any of it. I am barely up to the eighth grade level... . I don't understand English. [So,] don't you think there should be a program that brings me up to a certain point?"

Don believes that students should be aware of their own educational inadequacies and take responsibility for correcting them.
Three teachers commented on the fact that times have changed and that they are now teaching students who, as Mike said, “never would have gone to high school...20...or 30 years ago.” Sydney offered a detailed explanation as follows:

There [are] a whole lot more kids in school now than [there] ever were before because by now most of these people would have dropped out and gotten a job. They’re not dropping out because we’re being very successful in keeping them in, and there also aren’t any jobs out there for them. So, along with the desegregated schools that these [conservative] people were fondly remembering, there’s also a whole [lot of] other factors....There’s also a greater percentage of kids who would have given up on school or for whom school would have given up on them years ago. So, is that dragging down the test scores?....But, all things are not equal. This is not the same world...as it was 20 [or] 25 years ago, not only in the material being taught and the focus [that] the kids [are] arriving [with], but the kinds of kids that are arriving....We’re still struggling to teach [those whom] nobody would have had to teach 20 years ago. They wouldn’t have been here.

These teachers are clearly saying that teaching today is more challenging than it was several decades ago. In saying that they are now teaching students who, in the past, would have dropped out or been excluded from their schools, the participants wanted recognition for the challenges they face in teaching a different population of students. They also wanted to explain why they were not to be blamed.

Locating Educational Problems in Parents

Many teachers saw students’ parents as a factor in the decline in educational progress. This finding was discussed peripherally when I explained what some teachers said regarding the terrible social ills that their students face. For example, Natalie and Anne talked about alcoholic, suicidal or absent parents. Yet, other teachers were more direct in placing specific blame on their students’ parents. Sydney stated that some of her students’ parents do not value education, nor do they instill in their children a value for education. Tricia and Judy stated that from their experience with their inner city students,
it seems as if some parents do not understand the importance of an education, nor do they
understand the seriousness of MCAS. Judy stated,

My transitional [English] kids...[have] parents [who] don’t even know
they are taking the MCAS test...[Last year the school had a] parent
information [meeting, and]...11 showed in [our city], and I think this year
they may have had 20...or 30 [parents]...who wanted to know what this
was about, [and this was] out of all the kids in the whole entire school
system....[Do] you think these kids are going [listen to you say,]
“You’ve got to study hard [because] you have...MCAS next year”? You
are lucky if...somebody [is] saying [to them], “Do you have any
homework tonight? Let’s sit down and do homework.”

Natalie stated that parental neglect of their children is not a phenomenon
associated with low socio-economic status:

Children who come from very [well off] parents are being shipped to
nursery schools and daycare so the parents can work to support the houses,
the clothes, the patios...I don’t think that [quality] time is being spent [on
their children]. I am not putting down daycare. I know it is a necessity for
a lot of people, and I think there are some that are wonderful, but I don’t
think it takes the place of Mommy or Daddy’s knee. [Reading] was...[a]
built in part of our day,...[and it] got to be a pleasurable thing instead of
punishment....I have friends that work with...the early childhood program
who say they actually have to make home visits now to tell parents what to
tell kids...to prepare kids to come to school....That didn’t used to happen.
You could point to minorities or to newcomers [or] low income [parents]
and say, “It is those people,” [but] it isn’t all those people. It is a lot of
busy life....Then,...when the mommy is going out of the home, you have
TV becoming baby sitters.

Natalie continued by explaining how, according to her, some parents often interfere in
her ability to do her job of holding students to high standards:

The same parents who are demanding standards are keeping us from doing
our jobs by not allowing us to apply our very standards to their kids, and I
think that is out of guilt....Be behind them with the homework and the
books and the parent conferences and everything when it counts, and don’t
come in and override principals and school committee people and
everything else, which does go on in this town. Parents seem to be
running the show at the high school....We have an epidemic going on at
the high school of kids with tailor-made programs and tailor-made
schedules because they have oppositional defiant disorder or they have
school phobia or they have ADD or they have ADHD....The point is that these parents are just feeling their muscles and demanding programs....A kid is assigned a home tutor, because in her stubbornness she is refusing to come to school, [which is now called]...oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). We give it a diagnostic name [and] the kid stays home; [she] refuses to come to school, and then invariably we are sending work home....And, then we are [asked,] “What does she really need to do to [pass]?” In other words, “Modify what you send home. Give her two books that she likes to read, and let’s call it a course.”....What we send home [is] scaled down and scaled down and scaled down.

Natalie’s experiences demonstrate the deep frustration she feels about what she perceives is some parents’ lack of responsibility for their children’s education. These experiences also highlight her continual need to defend her competence and effectiveness as a teacher.

Summary of Findings

In Chapter Six, I give voice to the teachers’ socio-political analysis of the theories that guide MCAS, the motives for implementing this high-stakes testing requirement, and the current state of education in the Massachusetts and in the nation. Teachers’ analyses show that they see MCAS as rooted in politics and connected with wider social issues. In disputing the theories that guide MCAS, teachers begin by stating that they do not buy into the common belief that education has declined in the United States. They explain that the impetus for high-stakes testing is based on a series of myths inspired by politicians and promulgated through the media. These teachers assert that it is a myth that America will lose its competitive edge if the state of education is not improved in this country; that it is a myth that students are not getting the same quality education students once received years ago; that it is a myth that a high-stakes test will motivate students to learn and ultimately make them happy and successful; and, that it is a myth that standards-based reform and high-stakes testing will level the proverbial playing field.
Teachers’ analysis of the motives behind MCAS reveal that, on the whole, they do not believe those responsible for implementing MCAS had altruistic motives for doing so. With the exception of four teachers who reasoned that those responsible for implementing MCAS had a genuine interest in improving education, most teachers felt that the motives behind MCAS were political, and that MCAS was intended to garner support for the voucher movement. These teachers described their theories about how MCAS was a motive to save taxpayers money by using MCAS to eliminate three expensive educational programs: bilingual, vocational, and special education. They also stated that MCAS would save taxpayers money by sending present and potential welfare recipients, whom they explained are primarily minorities, the message that Massachusetts is no place to live because their children would not be able to pass this difficult test, and therefore, would be denied a diploma. Some participants stated that the motives behind MCAS were purely classist and racist, and they provided the fact that scores breakdown along socio-economic lines as proof that this is so. In a similar vein, some teachers explained that the people pushing for MCAS were those who want to remain in power and control knowledge, and that MCAS was both a coercive and hegemonic means of hording power.

Teachers furthered their analysis by explaining how, in their view, the current state of education in the United States and in their classrooms was better than it has ever been. They offered anecdotes of their classroom experiences to solidify their argument. Although these teachers often stated that there, of course, were some ineffective teachers, they were not to be counted among them. Moreover, they recognized that the state of education had some problems. In their analysis of these problems, they saw problems
with the educational system as rooted in a host of issues and people: social ills, politicians, students, parents, administrators, and the educational system—all of what or whom at times made it difficult for them to do their job effectively

Concluding Comments

In the process of my analysis, I was overwhelmed by the large chunk of data related to the teachers’ socio-political analysis of the theories and motives that guide MCAS. This was particularly so since I had never directly asked the teachers to analyze these forces. Further, I was both amazed and energized to see how their analyses and critiques mirrored those found in professional books and journals. If for no other reason than sheer quantity of data, I knew I had to include these analyses among my dominant themes. Yet, this theme did not flow neatly with the themes on the effects of MCAS on secondary teachers of English. To be true and fair to my participants’ experiences, as well as the interview process, I needed to find a way to make sense of this information so that I could give voice to my participants’ experiences and concerns. In doing so, I trust I have highlighted the teachers’ intellect and depth of reflection on the complexity of their experiences under a high-stakes testing policy.

I also believe that this data draws attention to the gaps in the research literature on high-stakes testing and its effects on teachers. Nowhere in my search and review of literature did I find research that gives voice to the participants’ intellectual analysis of the wider socio-political context. Rather the research literature primarily focuses on how high-stakes testing affects teachers’ practice and emotional well-being. In the next chapter, I discuss the significance of advancing teachers’ voices in this arena.
Similarly, I was struck by the teachers’ analysis of what they perceive is the current state of education in Massachusetts and in the nation. Their words highlight the complexities involved in teaching diverse student populations in general and under a high-stakes testing policy in particular. The teachers talked about the challenges they face in teaching students who are reared by parents with worldviews different (not less) from theirs, and students who must cope with very real and serious social ills. In the next chapter, I attempt to make sense of these complexities as well as the complexities found in the previous two chapters. I discuss these findings, highlight implications for policy, practice and further research, and draw some conclusions about Massachusetts secondary English teachers’ experiences with MCAS.
CHAPTER 7
MAKING MEANING OF THE PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES WITH MCAS

What does MCAS mean in the lives of the 16 participants in this study? How does this high-stakes test transmute the experiences of the classroom teacher in regard to students, curriculum, and pedagogy? As I analyzed my data, it became clear to me that instituting MCAS in the Massachusetts public school classroom raises issues beyond teaching and learning. What are these issues? What is the significance of these issues? And, what are their implications for policymakers, teachers, teacher educators, and researchers? In this chapter, I answer these questions, and offer a final conclusion.

Discussion

Educational Equity and Excellence: The Significance of Teachers’ Responses to the Effects of MCAS on their Practice

One overarching finding was that MCAS and the stakes attached to it have prompted teachers to change their practice. Teachers reported that their curriculum now matches more closely the MCAS test, and their instructional and assessment practices are geared towards helping students pass the MCAS test. Several teachers liked how the curriculum frameworks and MCAS helped them direct their curriculum; they liked that MCAS provided them some tangible, reachable objectives on which to focus instruction. In some ways, for these teachers, MCAS made their job easier: They knew exactly what they were supposed to teach, and they were able to form a pedagogy that made them feel effective. In addition, these teachers found this type of instruction satisfying because they could see progress in their students. For these teachers—whether or not their pedagogy was newly formed because of MCAS’ influence or something they had been doing all along—the content and skills that MCAS emphasized were consistent with their beliefs.
and philosophies about what a high school English curriculum should look like and what high school students should be able to do.

On the other hand, the majority of teachers in this study experienced the influence of MCAS on their practice as intrusive. These teachers reported feeling resentment over the state telling them—professionals and many who were veteran teachers—what and how to teach. They felt pressure to “cover” material for the MCAS test; they lamented the losses to their curriculum and the ways that MCAS forced changes to their pedagogy. Unlike the teachers who embraced the influence of MCAS on their work and gladly shifted their curriculum and pedagogy to mirror MCAS, teachers who viewed MCAS as intrusive reported making changes because they feared what would happen to students and themselves if they did not conform to MCAS requirements. What is the significance of some teachers liking the guidance that MCAS offered and others finding it intrusive? What is the central problem these findings highlight?

The central problem as I see it is that politicians and policymakers in Massachusetts have muddled the issues of excellence meaning “of the highest quality,” and minimum competency meaning basic literacy, and narrowness meaning limited in scope. Moreover, they have confused equity meaning fair or just with equality meaning, “having the same quality.” They use the phrase “high standards”—meaning educational excellence—as if it were a mantra for education reform without fully understanding what this phrase means. For example, the politicians in Massachusetts state that the crux of the Education Reform Act of 1993—the act which spells out the details of Massachusetts performance standards, which becomes MCAS—is to raise standards. They reason that if standards are raised via the curriculum frameworks and MCAS testing, then all students
will be guaranteed equal opportunity, and that a high school diploma will mean that a
student is ready to compete in the real world. Politicians lobbied hard for these
standards, and these standards have been translated into a threshold level of mastery
(currently set at the Needs Improvement level).

The confusion over standards: High, narrow or minimum competency standards?

It is admirable to want and indeed to attain high educational standards for all students.
Even so, this study shows that there are some serious problems with this line of thinking.
The first problem has to do with the notion of excellence, which in this case is
synonymous with standards. The word standards means different things to different
people, and the politicians and policymakers in this state have demonstrated that they are
confused about what they mean by standards.

On the one hand, they call for high standards by establishing a difficult test (see
McDermott, 2001 for an explanation of the difficulty of the MCAS test) and rigid,
punitive testing policies to show what they mean by high standards. This idea is evident
in my participants' analysis of the test. They reveal that MCAS is testing more than
whether or not students can simply read and write, but whether students can perform at a
college-bound level, which is not as much a high standard as it is a narrow standard of
literacy.

On the other hand, politicians state that they want students to achieve a
“reasonable standard” of competency, which means a minimum level of competency
(Rosenberg, 2001). This is evident in the recent BOE’s decision to allow students who
fail MCAS to take a more “focused” MCAS where students can demonstrate basic
competencies in mathematics and English. The push for minimum competency, likewise,
is obvious in politicians’ recent discussion about developing alternative assessments for special, vocational, and bilingual education students in order to determine if these students meet the expectations of a high school graduate (Rosenberg, 2001). At the same time, establishing minimum competency standards could potentially lead to narrow standards in the same way high standards can. One has to ask, what is it that these politicians want? Do they want students to demonstrate minimum competency in core subjects, or do they want students to achieve at high standards? Are politicians aware that in striving for minimum competency or high standards they are perpetuating a narrow interpretation of what literacy means?

The notion of standardization and its clash with curriculum and school realities

The confusion over standards—whether they are minimum competency, high or narrow standards—leads to another problem in the premise behind the push for educational reform via MCAS. Implicit in the discussion of standards is the notion of standardization, which has been translated to mean standardizing curriculum to ensure uniform standards. Proof of this lies in the Massachusetts Education Reform Act, which specifies that MCAS be designed to drive curricular and instructional reform. Further proof of the state’s desire to standardize curriculum is in the experiences of the teachers in this study. These teachers reported focusing—and in many cases narrowing—their curriculum to match the literacy skills that MCAS prescribes.

Politicians and state officials seem to believe that if all students are striving for the same high standards and being taught the same curriculum, then all students will be guaranteed access to an excellent education. Is it possible to have one curriculum and one system of evaluation that fits all students, or is it even desirable? Massachusetts
politicians and state officials answer both parts of this question affirmatively. Nonetheless, in answering yes by imposing this high-stakes testing policy, these politicians and state officials demonstrate their lack of knowledge of the history of education in this country and a true understanding of the current educational system in which teachers work. In 1879, when Calvin M. Woodward, a critic of traditional schooling, established the Manual Training School (the forerunner of vocational schools), he started a debate over the purpose of school and the type of curriculum for all students (Cremin, 1961). In a sense he asked, should there be one curriculum for all students, or should there be different curricula for different students? This debate lasted several decades, but the question was ultimately—and at least temporarily—answered that there should be different curricula for different students. This decision led to a century-long tradition of a vision of diverse schooling, one which offers students choices of schools (for example, traditional, vocational, alternative, magnet, and now charter schools) and which runs, for better or for worse, under complicated tracking systems.

The standards movement fails to honor this decision made a century ago, and is impracticable to the current realities of American education. Imposing a standardized curriculum on the current system of education where students benefit in various ways from different curricula will not promote equal educational opportunity for all students. Indeed, as this study shows, it only frustrates teachers and discriminates against some students who are working in earnest in systems of education where different curricula exist. If, in truth, politicians and policymakers want to revamp the entire system of education, including disbanding tracking and other school options so that all students are receiving the same standardized curriculum, they must be realistic about the timeframe in
which these changes can occur. Significant changes will not occur over a period of four years, which is the time period that state officials have established for holding teachers and students accountable (via MCAS) for a standardized curriculum. What it does is punish students and teachers working under an admittedly imperfect system. More significantly, most teachers in this study reveal that they have no desire to have the same standards and curricula for all students, for this level of standardization would shortchange students who are talented in ways MCAS does not acknowledge or assess.

Equal educational opportunity does not mean equity. Another problem that this study raises centers on the issue of equity. Massachusetts politicians and policymakers state that the goal of the Education Reform Act was to provide equal opportunity for all students. In fact, these officials assert that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has fulfilled its end of the educational reform bargain by increasing per pupil spending and investing monies into curriculum and professional development (Rosenberg, 2001). According to these officials, all they are asking for in return is demonstration that students can perform at a “threshold level of mastery” (Rosenberg, 2001, p. 4) of learning so that a diploma now means that all students are educated. Using the language of meritocracy, these politicians explain that the previous method of rewarding students diplomas harmed all students. They reason that social promotion and the granting of meaningless diplomas to students who did not earn them through hard work and demonstration of quality academic performance was doing a disservice to students because it did nothing to prepare them for the work they would be doing outside of high school (Rosenberg, 2001). According to the politicians and policymakers, simply handing out meritless diplomas sent these students a false message that they were in fact
educated. These politicians also argue that this system diminished the value of diplomas for those hard-working students who earned their high school diplomas. According to the politicians and policymakers, imposing a high-stakes test will reinstate the high school diploma to its former glory, thus ensuring that all students have equal access to a sound education. To the politicians, equal access is education reform that is equitable.

This study shows that there are flaws in this logic. In my view, the politicians' definitions of "equality" and "equity" show their naivety regarding the types of resources and opportunities students need to level the educational playing field or the social playing field for that matter. These politicians assume that if money for education is distributed equally among schools, then this will lead to equity. The teachers in this study disagree with this logic. For one thing, this study shows that teachers do not believe that simply allocating money for education will level the educational playing field. Their experiences tell them that formal schooling opportunities, no matter how effective and dynamic, do not necessarily compensate for the overwhelming social ills that students face daily in their personal lives. Money for textbooks, materials, professional development, and curriculum revision—albeit necessary and helpful—will not solve social injustices such as poverty and abuse, which students bring with them into their classrooms.

More importantly, the teachers in this study believe that MCAS as a high-stakes test is anything but equitable. They state that MCAS punishes those students who are the most vulnerable—those who are poor, those who have not benefited from early literacy opportunities, those who struggle to learn English, those who have learning disabilities. Moreover, many teachers in this study believe that MCAS hurts those students who most
need a high school diploma. The teachers contend that the stakes of MCAS injure these students by denying them the very thing they have indeed earned through hard work and educational performance, even if their performance cannot be demonstrated on this one particular test. According to these teachers, because the MCAS scores fall along socio-economic lines, the test ultimately will further divide the “haves from the have-nots,” will further exacerbate our already existing “system of winners and losers,” and will provide justification for stereotyping poor, minority, and learning disabled students as intellectually inferior. These consequences of MCAS are decidedly inequitable and in the end will fail to provide equal educational opportunity for all students.

More equitable appropriation of state monies for education is certainly something that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, indeed all states in this country, should strive for and attain. The teachers I interviewed, especially the teachers who worked in urban settings, were certainly grateful for the additional state funds their schools received as a result of Education Reform. Their schools used these funds to buy textbooks, technology, and other educational materials, and they were able to update their facilities. At the same time, some teachers reported resenting having strings attached to this new funding. This is evident in Ben’s explanation of the new funding formula:

There were lawsuits before the courts in Massachusetts about the inequity in the funding, primarily brought about by minority parents....Part of the compromise to drop the lawsuits was to come up with a new funding formula, and it was like, “Okay, we will give you the money, but there are going to be all these strings attached to it.” In the case of Massachusetts it was more like...there is going to be a big hammer that is going to hit you over the head.

Ben’s comment is indicative of how the spirit behind the new funding formula is perverted. Teachers like Ben perceive the state funding as something that they have to
earn, not something that is given to the schools because politicians believe in equitable funding for public education. As Ben’s comments show, he sees this funding as something with strings that could be yanked away from schools or as a hammer that will inevitably hurt them if they do not use it as directed.

According to most teachers in this study, MCAS will not achieve its goal of equalizing education for all students, nor will it foster a more equitable educational system. Therefore, one has to ask whether the exorbitant cost of MCAS could be better spent? The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has spent a great deal of money on this high-stakes testing experiment. The state has just committed $76 million for the recent test contract to Harcourt Educational Measurement, and they have spent additional monies on costs associated with curriculum and professional development. The state could use the money earmarked for education for things teachers feel are seriously needed to do their jobs effectively: lower class sizes, quality professional development, state-of-the-art facilities, and educational materials.

How the confusion over standards affects the secondary English classroom. How politicians and policymakers answer the question regarding standards is very important, for it has implications for teachers’ practice. As MCAS now stands, teachers have been working under the premise that the state officials want all students to achieve a narrow version of high standards. The test itself is a guide to what students should be mastering, and an analysis of the test shows that the tenth grade English Language Arts MCAS test is anything but a basic literacy skills test. That is, the test requires students to do more than simply show that they can read and write. MCAS requires students to read expressly for literary analysis and write specifically to prove a case, and these approaches to
literacy are really neither high nor minimum, but rather narrow approaches to literacy. As this study shows, the implications of teaching to this type of test are quite serious.

Emphasizing seek-and-find and close-reading-for-evidence methods are just two ways for students to approach a text. What is left out is a personal response to a text, a transactional approach to literature (see Rosenblatt, 1995), a historical approach to analysis, and many other critical literary approaches. The MCAS way of understanding literature assumes that the only importance in reading literature is for its structural elements or its technical qualities. The approach to teaching literature that MCAS encourages cuts off potentially exciting, meaning-making and vibrant discussion opportunities. In the extreme, strictly adhering to MCAS literary analysis skills could potentially turn students off to the written word, or even worse, leave students with the misconception that literary devices and evidence are the sum total of what a piece of literature has to offer them.

Further, focusing so intently on formulaic writing skills sends an equally damaging message to students about what it means to be a writer. This message tells students that the only type of writing to value is expository writing—writing that is highly organized, technical, and written for a distant, evaluative audience. MCAS writing does not foster an appreciation for the generation of ideas through personal or freewriting. It does not encourage students to play with language in crafting their own literary works—poetry, short stories, narrative essays, and plays. While it may be true that in recent decades teachers have overemphasized writing strategies such as freewriting at the expense of ignoring expository writing, swinging to the other extreme of teaching only expository writing skills does a disservice to students. A more
An integrated approach to teaching writing presents students with a healthy understanding of the range of audiences and purposes for writing.

Moreover, when a narrow set of standards are prescribed, teachers are left to interpret them in ways that may promote rote, lower level thinking skills such as memorization and formulaic writing. In doing these exercises, students are not learning to evaluate and synthesize, which are the high order thinking skills we so desire our students to achieve. Nor are these MCAS skills promoting more humanistic objectives for the teaching of English such as advancing an appreciation for literature, encouraging students to be lifelong readers and learners, and helping students understand the power in their own writing abilities.

This study shows that requiring all students to take a high-stakes test that emphasizes a narrow approach to literacy can be damaging to English teachers and the students they teach. A narrow standardization of a discipline as complex as English via a high-stakes test will neither promote equality or equity; students who engage with and create texts in ways other than is sanctioned by the MCAS test may be excluded from viable learning opportunities, and their potential may not be realized. The debate about standards should not center on a hierarchical view of standards. That is, debating whether or not standards should be high or minimum will not foster the variety of literacy and critical thinking skills students need to live and work in society because this view restricts students’ engagement with texts and literacy opportunities. The varied students with which teachers work are better served by a non-hierarchical view of standards, one that promotes diverse standards and abilities, rather than narrow standards and abilities.
The Problem with the Mixed Message of Teachers' Role in Education Reform Efforts

The ways in which MCAS as a test instrument and MCAS as a high-stakes testing policy empowered and/or disempowered teachers highlights significant aspects of what it means to be a teacher and a professional. More importantly, it highlights the mixed message of the role teachers are to play in educational reform efforts such as MCAS.

A handful of teachers in this study stated that MCAS empowered them by validating what they do in the classroom, and by carving out professional opportunities for them. Moreover, these teachers relished their new roles as teacher leaders and experts. One seemingly paradoxical discovery in this study is that while some teachers were clearly empowered by the professional development aspects of MCAS, the vast majority of teachers I interviewed were disempowered in multiple ways. These teachers lamented their lack of control over top-down curricular and instructional mandates imposed by legislators, policymakers, and Massachusetts DOE officials. They admitted complying with these top-down mandates out of fear of what would happen to their students if they failed MCAS and out of fear of further state penetration of their classrooms. They also feared the threat of teacher testing, state takeovers/audits, and diminished state funding for education. Moreover, teachers felt insulted by the implications that they did not know what or how to best teach their students. These findings highlight central assumptions about the role teachers are to play in educational reform efforts, and the methods the state officials use to establish these roles. More importantly, these findings underscore the duplicity of the state’s vision of teachers’ roles.

The state defining the role of teachers as state agents through coercion and hegemony. Reformers recognize that teachers play a crucial role in the standards
movement. They understand that teachers are the ones primarily responsible for getting students to achieve and perform according to what they believe are high standards. Therefore, the politicians, policymakers and other state officials have taken deliberate steps to define the role of the teacher as *agents* of the state or as *implementers* of policy in ways that ensure their vision of reform is enacted. The state used two different set of tactics to define this teacher role: coercion and hegemony.

The state’s coercive tactics are certainly clear to the participants in this study. These teachers talked at length about how the state, through public humiliation and threatening educational policies, has strong-armed them into complying with educational mandates. On the other hand, less clear to teachers are the hegemonic tactics that the state used to get teachers to “buy into” education reform. The first hegemonic tactic involves the state’s solicitation of teacher and administrator participation in the development of both the curriculum frameworks and the MCAS test. This gives the impression that the curriculum frameworks and MCAS have been sanctioned by Massachusetts classroom teachers. At the same time, this participation, as several of my participants stated, is really nothing more than a form of tokenism; that is, only a token number of educators have participated in making influential decisions that have had a tremendous impact on teachers. For example, only 17 to 18 Massachusetts educators were on the tenth grade English Language Arts MCAS test development committee, and only seven educators are listed as participants in the development of the Massachusetts *English Language Arts Curriculum Framework* (1997). Although 18 may seem like a fair number of educators to assist in the development of the MCAS test, it is important to note that the majority of these educators are not classroom teachers, but rather
administrators, college professors, and educational consultants. Additionally, this
tokenism has led a few of my participants to conclude that MCAS is designed to maintain
the current power structures in this country.

The second hegemonic tactic the state uses to define the teacher’s role is evident
in a recent article Massachusetts state representative Stan Rosenberg (2001) wrote
encouraging the public not to abandon MCAS. He states,

Instead of dictating to local districts on matters of curriculum, textbooks
and teaching methods, Massachusetts has worked to establish a reasonable
standard of competency in English and mathematics, and left it to local
districts to choose the best means of hitting the target. The state has
developed recommended frameworks and made them available to local
districts in order to help them prepare students to meet the standards. It
has made additional resources available for professional development and
training as well, but it has avoided making teachers and local officials
mere agents of the state without the power to exercise professional
discretion. (p. 4)

Rosenberg’s explanation of how the state has presented the curriculum
frameworks and has made MCAS tests and MCAS materials available to teachers implies
that these are mere recommendations and resources teachers may or may not use to help
them prepare students for MCAS. My findings categorically show that most of my
participants do not view the curriculum frameworks and more specifically MCAS as
mere recommendations. On the contrary, these teachers’ experiences with MCAS reveal
that they feel that the state is “dictating” curriculum and pedagogy, that they have little
choice in how they “hit the target,” and that they lack the “power to exercise professional
discretion.” The language of “availability” that Rosenberg uses is intended to lead
teachers into a false sense that they are not “agents of the state,” and that they have the
power to exercise their own professional judgments regarding curriculum and pedagogy.
My participants’ experiences with MCAS negates this language of availability.
Finally, teachers’ participation in the scoring process and MCAS-related workshops are other hegemonic tactics to lead teachers to feel as though they have legitimate participation in the educational reform process. Some teachers have felt empowered by their new roles as leaders and experts, for these were powerful experiences for those teachers who participated as such. While it is important to recognize teachers’ positive experiences with their new roles and credit the state with fostering teachers’ sense of efficacy and power, these teachers were not aware of their being co-opted as “agents of the state,” and their participation in these reform activities does little more than advance the state’s agenda for or vision of educational reform.

It is no wonder that teachers in this study reported feeling frustrated and demoralized by the mixed message they receive about the importance of their role in educating students. On the one hand, through hegemonic tactics, the state has led teachers to believe that their role is crucial and valued; that they are entrusted with the responsibility of teaching students to high standards; and that they have control over the design of curricular and pedagogical decisions. On the other hand, via stringent overseeing policies, teachers are told they cannot be trusted to do their job right. In a sense, the state officials are saying to teachers, “We don’t trust you to enact these policies in good faith, so we will make sure there is no room for error.” This disempowered teachers by stripping away their sense of professionalism and ultimately pieces of their professional identity.

Renewing the debate over whether or not teaching is a profession. The findings in this study renew the debate about whether or not teaching is really a profession, a debate that has persisted for nearly a century (for example, see Flexner, 1915 and Dorn, 1998).
The teachers’ experiences with MCAS reveal that MCAS (as well as other education reform efforts) have made teachers question whether or not they are professionals. In the course of the interviews, teachers defined what they believe a professional is. They see a professional teacher as someone who, among other things, has been specifically educated and trained to do his or her job. They believe that teachers as professionals should enjoy autonomy to make informed decisions that are respected and trusted, and that their input and opinions about educational matters should be valued because they are the trained experts in this area.

Several teachers in my study stated that the Education Reform Law and policies—especially those related directly to MCAS—were stripping them of their earned professional status. For example, teachers reported that the dictates over curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices and the threat of sanctions sent the message that that they were not trusted to make effective educational decisions for their students. They felt as if the state took away their autonomy to make these decisions, and dismissed their education, training, and experience. Judy’s comments in Chapter Five about how MCAS has superseded her role as an evaluator is a good example of this. She said, “The state is saying, ‘Your opinion counts for nothing. Your grade counts for nothing….Your assessment counts for nothing because they can’t pass the test.’….How come my opinion means squat?” Several teachers also related stories about how the state sent them a message that they were not really professionals at all. For example, Tom and Ben talked about the state wanting them to sign a no-tell-no-cheating oath that they viewed as “emblematic” of how teachers are manipulated and treated with distrust and disrespect.
Further, teachers explained that the media and the general public were likewise involved in de-professionalizing them through bashing and blaming reports of their incompetence and failure. Ultimately, these tactics—dictating curriculum and pedagogy, threatening sanctions, bashing teachers publicly—have left teachers feeling less professional, and, in turn, have disempowered them. Whether or not teachers are de-professionalized is less significant than what teachers reported are the consequences of feeling de-professionalized and disempowered. My findings on the consequences of the disempowerment felt by teachers—the deskilling of teachers, feelings of pressure and demoralization, low teacher commitment, and the desire to leave the profession—are red flags that signal the need for a renewed sense of professionalism in the field. This is especially true given the current teacher shortage that will only escalate as Baby Boomers begin to retire in the next decade. What capable, experienced person would willingly subject himself or herself to a career path filled with bashing, blaming, and disrespect?

The Importance of Teachers’ Voices in the Standards Movement

Even though the teachers in this study felt disempowered and silenced in ways that prevented them from taking any action to counter the public blaming and bashing, in the interview process, they were able to engage in the debates surrounding the standards movement through voicing their own socio-political analysis of the recent reform efforts. These teachers’ socio-political analyses of the national standards movement, which includes MCAS, are forceful. This is particularly true since I never asked the teachers directly to analyze these aspects of the standards movement, and yet these analyses constitute a large portion of my data. What these teachers reveal is that they view MCAS as rooted in politics and that it cannot be divorced from wider social issues. They stated
that the theories underpinning MCAS and the national standards movement are grounded in a series of "myths" that, according to them, do not match their experiences as teachers (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). For example, some teachers said it was a myth that America was no longer economically competitive as evidenced by poor international and SAT test scores. According to these teachers, it was a myth that students are not getting the same quality education they once received, and that high-stakes testing will both motivate students to want to learn and will "level the playing field." Also, some teachers revealed their understanding that the motives behind MCAS were rooted in "racism," "classism," "power," "hegemony," and "politics." Furthermore, some teachers argue that education is better than it has ever been. Some see that whatever problems exist are rooted in social ills, social inequities, parental misunderstandings about education, and lack of student motivation. What is the significance of these analyses?

The importance of teachers' socio-political analysis. Teachers' socio-political analysis of the theories that guide MCAS and the motives behind this high-stakes test are important for several reasons. First, these analyses present an important insight into how teachers make meaning of a complex, politically-driven educational reform effort. Moreover, this meaning-making shows that teachers do not work in a vacuum. They are keenly aware of who makes the school policies, what theories and motives guide these decisions, and who is charged with implementing these policies. Teachers are quite knowledgeable and articulate about all of these issues. They too have their own socio-political theories. The assumption that some of the politicians and policymakers seem to have is that teachers really should have no other role in this whole standards movement and high-stakes testing experience other than to do as they are told to do—that is,
implement the policy by adjusting their curricula, preparing students for a test, and somehow getting students to perform well. By presenting their own theories, the teachers reject this singular role of “implementer” of educational policy.

Second, the teachers’ analyses, likewise, demonstrate that the work of a teacher is complicated. Teachers are not unthinking automatons, nor is teaching an anti-intellectual job. Rather, teaching requires educators to think about and reflect on a number issues on multiple levels. To simply assume that teachers will enact a policy without constructing an understanding or appreciation of what guides it and who the key players are is erroneous. Their analyses highlight the teachers’ struggle to implement a policy with which they may not agree in part or in its entirety. At the same time, the participants’ words demonstrate the limitations of a linear model of education reform, which assumes that creating high content standards, then creating high performance standards to test them will naturally and neatly lead to educational excellence.

Third, what is interesting is that the participants’ arguments mirror those discussed and debated in professional journals, newspapers, popular magazines, books, and on television. For example, the teachers in this study criticized using international test scores as proof that our nation is at-risk in ways similar to the criticisms lodged by Berliner and Biddle (1995) and DiConti (1996). What makes these teachers’ analyses significant is that they, classroom teachers, give voice to their theories, and these theories are formed by both intellectual pursuits and personal and professional experiences.

These teachers’ analyses are important because the voice of teachers is virtually absent in the on-going debate about educational reform efforts and the efficacy and consequences of high-stakes testing policies. Yet, it is the teachers who are closest to
those most affected by these policies, that is, the students, and therefore, teachers should be seen as informed experts on the positive and negative effects of MCAS on education. Policymakers, legislators, and test experts have ignored this teacher expertise, something I believe has hurt the standards movement in general and MCAS testing in particular. Teachers’ voices can make significant contributions to the state’s efforts to reform education. Their knowledge and understanding of the subject matter, students, teaching and learning, and the realities of schooling can help politicians and policymakers make decisions about equitable ways to improve the educational process.

Implications For Policymakers, Politicians, Teachers, Teacher Educators and Researchers

Implications for Politicians and Policymakers

Rethink standards and MCAS. This study has uncovered some of the fundamental problems with the current educational reform movement, such as politicians and policymakers’ confusion over what they mean about standards, equity, and the role teachers are to play in educational reform. The implications for politicians and policymakers are clear. First, they need to take a long hard look at their educational expectations for students and teachers and the ways MCAS either helps or hinders what they want to accomplish. Second, they must begin to view standards in non-hierarchical terms; that is, standards should not be seen as either high or low (minimum competency), but rather as diverse. Based on the participants’ experiences and given the realities of the current educational system, it stands to reason that the most equitable decision they could make regarding standards would be to ensure that all students be given a variety of assessments to demonstrate what they know and what they have learned.
Third, politicians and policymakers need to make an informed decision about the future of this high-stakes test. Twelve out of the 16 participants in this study were clear when they stated that the ideal action politicians and policymakers could take would be to scrap MCAS all together, or at the very least, do away with the stakes attached to it. In order for these participants’ wish to become a reality, it would require a more liberal, open-minded political climate as well as strong political leadership, factors most teachers in this study were pessimistic about. Few politicians admit their limited understanding and knowledge about teaching and learning; most rely on nostalgia—past images idealized against their current images of school (Hargreaves, 2001)—when making important decisions about education, students, and teachers, such as the decisions to implement a high-stakes testing policy. In a perfect world, politicians would admit their limitations and turn the business of educating students back to the education experts—classroom teachers, administrators, teacher educators, and educational researchers. Moreover, they would start viewing these experts as something other than self-serving, incompetent people, for these perceptions do little to advance any significant form of educational reform. Instead of viewing teachers and other educational experts as foes—people whom they distrust and with whom they need to do battle—politicians and policymakers would view them as comrades or colleagues who need support to do the most effective job they can.

I am not confident that politicians will take a supportive role in the business of education. In other words, I acknowledge that my recommendation (on the behalf of the teachers in this study) to disband this high-stakes test is not terribly realistic. My more realistic recommendation is that a new version of MCAS—one that centers on a broader
approach to literacy practices and not a narrow prescriptive approach to reading and writing—be developed. This would mean that state officials and test developers would create a new version of MCAS—one that includes a variety of assessments and that is informed by classroom teachers’ experiences and educational research.

**Teachers as legitimate participants in educational reform.** So much of what the teachers in this study expressed to me about their experiences with MCAS is tied to their feelings of disempowerment and silencing. As this study shows, they have good reason to feel as such, for teacher participation has been reduced to the barest form of tokenism and their role has been relegated to that of state agent. What are the implications of these findings? First, it is imperative for policymakers and politicians to re-vision their images of teachers. Teachers are not automatons waiting to be told how to do their job. Rather, the teachers I interviewed are all highly educated, knowledgeable, reflective practitioners who know a great deal about how best to teach their students. Moreover, the findings on teachers’ socio-political analysis demonstrate that teachers are intellectuals who have their own informed theories about the standards movement, MCAS testing, and practice. The participants in this study wanted the politicians and state officials to know this about them. In fact, several teachers invited, even dared, persons in power to visit their classrooms so that they could witness their effectiveness. Politicians and policymakers would serve their constituents well if they accepted these teachers’ invitations and spent quality time in different types of classrooms all over the state, observing and having real conversations with teachers and students.

Second, politicians and policymakers need to abolish their practice of token teacher participation and strive for true teacher representation in the standards movement.
Just as the American colonists over 200 years ago rebelled against taxation without representation, so too may teachers rebel, in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways, against MCAS implementation without representation. It is unacceptable for state leaders to create and establish educational policies, curriculum mandates, and mandatory high-stakes testing without legitimate and significant teacher input. This may require restructuring the ways in which educational policies are decided within this commonwealth. Currently, the Massachusetts Board of Education is charged with deciding and implementing educational policy. Although the Board proceedings are advertised and open to the public, and although the Board builds in time for public opinion, ultimately the decisions are left to the members of the Board. Other than voting for the governor who appoints the Board members, very little of the way educational policies get decided is democratic. As one of my participants intimated when talking about how MCAS was imposed upon teachers and students, this process is really fascism thinly disguised as democracy.

There is no reason why teachers cannot have a more equitable role in the decision-making process, especially when the decisions have a profound impact on their work. Policymakers and politicians need to include a wide variety of teachers, not teachers who are hand-picked to serve their needs, when creating important educational policies. One way in which a more equitable representation can be established is by allowing each school or district to vote for one informed and knowledgeable teacher to represent their concerns at Board meetings where they have a rightful vote. In addition, it is imperative for more teachers from a variety of school settings to be on the ground floor in constructing curriculum frameworks and MCAS tests. It is also important that teachers
be treated professionally as they participate in this process; they need to be paid for their
time and expertise, and they need release time to do this important work.

Renewing teachers’ sense of professionalism. The disempowerment that teachers
experienced as a result of MCAS has undermined their sense of professionalism. The
question then becomes, how can teachers renew their sense of professionalism and feel
more empowered? What my participants seem to be saying is that they desire two crucial
changes in the education reform movement. First, they desire more autonomy over the
decisions in their classrooms. That is, they want more input into the policies and
practices that are driving their curriculum—the curriculum frameworks and the MCAS
test. They believe that they have the education, training, and experience to provide
valuable input into these two areas, and they would like the opportunity to demonstrate
their competence. An example of their willingness to demonstrate competence can be
seen by their desire to have the governor and state officials come into their classrooms
and see what they do. Whether or not this will provide the teachers autonomy remains to
be seen, but at minimum this act could open the lines of communication between those
who make policy decisions and those charged with implementing the policies.

Second, teachers want respect from the politicians, state officials, the media, and
the general public. Teachers’ reputations have been shredded and left bleeding by those
they serve. These wounds are deep and festering. Moreover, just when the scar tissue
begins to form, the scabs are ripped off by yet another report about test scores or another
wave of mandates that teachers find insulting. It is difficult to undo almost 20 years of
damage to teachers’ self esteem and reputation. Yet, given that some teachers have
admitted that their commitment to teaching is dwindling and that they desire to leave the
profession as a result of the MCAS test and other educational reform policies, it is important for the blaming and the bashing to stop. It is too easy for politicians, the media and the public to make quick decisions about the state of education and the effectiveness of teachers based on test scores. Again, it is important for politicians and policymakers to spend time with teachers and in schools so that they can begin to understand the complexities of schooling and the work of teachers. Moreover, the method of holding teachers and schools accountable through the public reporting of scores and the ranking of schools must cease, for these accountability methods are ineffective. They do not offer the full picture of what schooling is about and what teachers do, and these methods only make teachers feel demoralized.

Implications for Teachers

**Clarity and support through teachers talking with teachers.** The findings show that teachers are clearly under duress in regard to the imposition of this high-stakes test and they need time and space with which to make sense of their experiences. At the close of the interview sessions, teachers often remarked on how they were not aware of the impact of MCAS on their work until they started talking about it with me. These comments show that talking about MCAS can be a fruitful and enlightening experience for teachers, who are often too busy with their daily activities and responsibilities to think critically about something over which they have very little control. An implication that emerges from this finding is that teachers need a forum in which to strategize ways of dealing curricular and instructional mandates. This forum can be a round-table discussion or teacher study groups where teachers can examine the MCAS test through a critical lens and reflect on its impact on their practice. This study group can help teachers solve
curricular and pedagogical dilemmas that the teachers in my study often raised. For example, one key element that emerged from the data was that teachers often struggle with the need to prepare students for MCAS and their desire to keep a humanistic approach in their curriculum and pedagogy. Many teachers in this study refused to give up instructional activities where students played with language or simply appreciated the literature. At the same time, they were realistic about the imperative to teach students how to write five paragraph literary analysis essays and to drill students in their ability to pick out literary devices in a passage. Through collaborative critical inquiry, teachers could find solutions together.

The imperative for teacher activism. One finding that emerged from this study is that not all teachers are aware of the role the state expects them to play in the educational reform movement. Nor are all teachers aware of the tactics the politicians and policymakers use to get teachers to comply with their wishes. This highlights the need for teachers, either collectively or individually, to question their role as “agents of the state.” Moreover, teachers need to form teacher action groups to explore ways to voice their concerns to the state. Teachers as active forces in their own professional empowerment can be a thorny issue. Most teachers are busy with the daily teaching routines. That is, even barring their worries and frustrations regarding curriculum frameworks and MCAS, most teachers work with 100 to 150 students every day, plan weekly and daily lessons, grade piles of papers, and generally think about ways of meeting the individual needs of their students. Consequently, they are often reluctant to “get involved” or cynical about whether or not the effort is worth their time. Yet, the findings regarding the ways in which teachers feel bashed, blamed, coerced, and
disempowered underscore the urgent need for teachers to find their voice. A strong, united teacher voice can correct public misconceptions about their competence, and inform politicians and policymakers about the consequences of undermining their professional identity.

Implications for Teacher Educators

Teacher educators cannot ignore the fact that this high-stakes test exists and is a large part of the experience of classroom teachers. In the same way that teacher educators have incorporated strategies and information about special and bilingual education, they must address explicitly the types of English practices that MCAS privileges. In doing so, they can create the necessary space for teachers and prospective teachers to reflect on and take action to empower themselves as a response to this newly mandated requirement. Teacher educators can invite preservice and inservice teachers to examine the test through a critical lens. They can ask practicing and prospective teachers how they will negotiate what theory and research tells them about engaging diverse student bodies with literature and writing with the reality of a test-driven educational environment. For example, how will teachers incorporate the product-centered writing approach that MCAS emphasizes with the proven theory-based process approach to writing? How will teachers integrate a humanistic approach to reading and appreciating literature with the specific literary analysis techniques that MCAS demands? Further, teacher educators should assist teachers not only in raising questions, but also in constructing answers to these questions. In summation, the teacher educator is charged with the challenge of preparing teachers to educate a diverse student body under the
auspices of a test-driven curriculum as well as the challenge of supporting teachers who decide to take action against these policies.

Implications for Researchers

As my findings show, teachers are most bothered by the socio-political consequences of this test on “underclass” students—vocational, special, and bilingual education students. While there is no doubt that the teachers in this study want students to be prepared for the work world with solid, practical literacy skills, they do not believe that MCAS is an effective measurement of these skills nor an effective predictor of what students are capable of doing in a global, technological society. More research needs to be done on the effects of MCAS on these students’ lives. In what ways does MCAS further separate the haves from the have-nots? How does MCAS perpetuate or not perpetuate a class-stratified society? Down the road, in five or ten years, what will these students, who have been denied a diploma, be doing? Will MCAS really thwart students’ abilities to get the jobs that they most desire and may be most qualified for?

Further, in light of the newness of the MCAS test and the sanction attached to it, teachers’ reactions to it may be heightened. That is, their current responses to these recent educational reform efforts, of which MCAS is a part, may or may not prove to be sustained over a long period of time. This is an excellent opportunity for researchers to conduct a longitudinal study on the experiences of teachers with MCAS. In five or ten years, will teachers still struggle to integrate externally imposed standards into their curriculum, or will MCAS become accepted and commonplace? Will teachers have carved out new and empowering roles for themselves in the standards movement? Will the consequences of MCAS lead to attrition in the field?
Conclusions

What are we to conclude about the effects of the tenth grade English Language Arts MCAS test on Massachusetts secondary teachers of English? What have these 16 participants’ experiences told us? I attempt to answer these questions by using the words of one of my participants as she grappled with the meaning MCAS had for her:

Do I object to the MCAS? Yeah, I resent it in a million ways. It is really funny because I...think the problem in the media and even in schools and sometimes in teacher’s rooms and in parents’ homes [is that] they have created this dichotomy—you are either for the test or against [it]. But, like most of life, I just don’t think that is how things work. I think it is a fairly tangled web, and there [are] some good things about being held accountable as a state and within a state, and there are some bad things about having the kids’ future rest on the test. And, so it isn’t that it is either good or bad. It is how can we make it the most useful and effective tool for schools and for children, and how can we eliminate some of those problems that exist with all high stakes testing? (Anne)

Anne’s words capture the complexity involved in imposing a high-stakes test for which teachers and students are held accountable. Teachers reported many losses associated with narrowing their curriculum and pedagogy, and fears regarding teaching to a test that focuses on a narrow view of English teaching. They recounted stories of how MCAS has disempowered them as professionals—stripping them of certainty, esteem, autonomy, and voice. And, through their socio-political analysis of the theories and motives behind MCAS, they pointed to what they believe is the unfairness of imposing this high-stakes testing requirement.

At the same time, however, teachers reported experiencing a number of gains. They welcomed the focus that MCAS and the curriculum frameworks provided. The participants reported learning new and exciting things about curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Some explained that the content of MCAS validated what they do in the
classroom, while professional opportunities associated with MCAS created new, empowering roles for these teachers. These teachers’ experiences show that MCAS as a test surrounded by high-stakes policies is, indeed, as Anne states, a “tangled web,” a web that this study has only begun to untangle.

Policymakers purport that in the service of improving education MCAS as a top-down mandate will force teachers to teach certain content and skills and force students to learn these skills. Yet, my findings reveal that this line between educational reform and improved education is neither unidirectional nor linear. Rather, it is a complex network of influences, motives and actions. How policy winds its way into practice depends upon the varied contexts in which teachers perceive and experience reform. Since each teacher’s experience is located within varied school contexts and informed by wide-ranging personal histories, knowledge, theories, and opinions, it is impossible for a policy to have the sweeping unified impact that policymakers and legislators predict. Students may continue to fail MCAS, regardless of whether or not there are stakes attached to it. These failures should not necessarily be seen as failings of teachers or an educational system. Poor performance on a high-stakes test can be attributed to a host of reasons that my participants and I discuss in this study: the limited design and content of the test, the varied backgrounds and histories of students, the teachers’ resistance to teaching to a high-stakes exam, and larger social inequities.

This information needs to be disseminated to wider audiences, beyond those who typically read a doctoral dissertation or educational journals. Policymakers, legislators, parents and the general public must realize that ignoring and dismissing teachers’ opinions and experiences, and enacting policies that diminish their role to unthinking,
compliant automatons will do a tremendous disservice to efforts to make significant changes in students' education. I hope that this study will inform policymakers, legislators and the like in ways that will prompt them to include teachers as equals in the decisions they make for the betterment of students.
## MCAS Writing Scoring Guide (Long Composition)

### Topic/Idea Development

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<tr>
<td>* Limited topic/idea development, organization, and/or details</td>
<td>* Limited or weak topic/idea development, organization, and/or details</td>
<td>* Rudimentary topic/idea development and/or organization</td>
<td>* Moderate topic/idea development and organization</td>
<td>* Full topic/idea development</td>
<td>* Rich topic/idea development</td>
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<td>* Little or no awareness of audience and/or task</td>
<td>* Limited awareness of audience and/or task</td>
<td>* Basic supporting details</td>
<td>* Adequate, relevant details</td>
<td>* Strong details</td>
<td>* Effective/reward use of language</td>
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### Analytic Annotations

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<tr>
<td><strong>Topic Development</strong></td>
<td><strong>Commentations</strong></td>
<td><strong>Needs</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The overall effect of the paper</td>
<td>TX effective and appropriate development of topic or ideas</td>
<td>TJ appropriate response to task</td>
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<td>TY original development of topic or ideas</td>
<td>TK more development of the topic</td>
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<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
<td>GX evidence of planning</td>
<td>OJ organization of ideas</td>
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<tr>
<td>The degree to which the response is</td>
<td>OY consistently focused from beginning to end</td>
<td>OK transitions among ideas</td>
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<td>* focused</td>
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<td>* clearly and logically ordered</td>
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<td>* clarified by paragraphs</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Details</strong></td>
<td>DX carefully chosen, relevant details</td>
<td>DJ more effective choice of details</td>
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<td>The degree to which the response includes examples that develop the main points.</td>
<td>DY develop details that support the topic</td>
<td>DK development of details beyond listing</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Language/Style</strong></td>
<td>LX word choice enhances meaning</td>
<td>LJ more variety/richness in word choice</td>
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<td>The degree to which manipulation of language, including vocabulary, word choice, word combination, and sentence variety is effectively achieved.</td>
<td>LY Language creates distinctive voice, tone, or style</td>
<td>LE more variety in sentence structure</td>
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### Standard English Conventions

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<tr>
<td>* Errors seriously interfere with communication AND</td>
<td>* Errors interfere somewhat with communication and/or</td>
<td>* Errors do not interfere with communication and/or</td>
<td>* Control of sentence structure, grammar, and usage mechanics (Length and complexity of essay provide opportunity for student to show control of standard English conventions)</td>
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<tr>
<td>* Little control of sentence structure, grammar and usage, and mechanics</td>
<td>* Too many errors relative to the length of the essay or complexity of sentence structure, grammar and usage and mechanics</td>
<td>* Few errors relative to length of essay or complexity of sentence structure, grammar and usage and mechanics</td>
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### Analytic Annotations

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<td><strong>Sentences</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The degree to which the response includes sentences that are correct in structure</td>
<td>SP correct sentence structure</td>
<td>SR correct sentence structure</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Grammar and Usage</strong></td>
<td>GUP correct application of grammatical rules</td>
<td>GUR correct application of grammatical rules</td>
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<tr>
<td>The degree to which the response demonstrates correct use of standard grammatical rules of English</td>
<td>GUS control of vocabulary and word usage</td>
<td>GUS greater attention to correct word usage</td>
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<tr>
<td>* word usage and vocabulary</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanics</strong></td>
<td>MP control of mechanics aids clarity</td>
<td>MR greater control of mechanics</td>
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<tr>
<td>The degree to which the response demonstrates correct spelling</td>
<td>MQ correct mechanics in sophisticated construction</td>
<td>MS more careful proofreading</td>
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APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM

Name: _______________________________ Pseudonym: __________________________

School: ______________________________ Pseudonym: __________________________

Grade Level and Courses One Teaches: __________________________________________

Home Address: ____________________________________________
(Please include street, city and zip code)

School Address: ____________________________________________
(Please include street, city and zip code)

E-mail Address: ____________________________________________

Home Phone: ___________________________ Work Phone: ________________________

Best Time of Day to Call: ____________ Worse Time of Day to Call: ____________

Number of Years of Teaching Experience: ____________ Age (optional): __________

Notes on Background of School:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

General Notes:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
Who am I, and what is the purpose of this project?

My name is Cara L. Turner, and I am a doctoral student in Teacher Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. The purpose of this research study is to determine what it is like to teach English in light of the recent MCAS tests.

What is the interview process?

If you agree to participate, I will interview you on three separate occasions during the months of May, June or July 2000. Each interview will last approximately 90 minutes, and they will be spaced several days apart. These interviews will be scheduled at the mutual convenience of the participant and the interviewer. The first interview centers on the participant’s life history up until this point in time. The second interview revolves around the details of your daily work, and the third asks the participant what these experiences mean to you. All interviews will be audio taped and transcribed.

How will the researcher protect the participant’s identity?

Anonymity of the participant is a priority so that he or she can share freely and openly. Although I cannot fully guarantee anonymity, I will take the following steps to protect the participant’s identity:

A. All interviews will take place in a safe and private place to be designated by the participant.
B. I will not identify the name of the participant, school, or other identifying particulars of the participant to anyone with the exception of the chairperson of my dissertation committee, and only then if necessary.
C. A pseudonym will be substituted in all transcripts and written discourse for the participant’s name, and I will take every step to adequately disguise the participant’s identity and teaching location in any published materials and presentations.
D. If I use an outside transcriber, I will provide explicit instructions on how to protect the identity of the participants, and I will require complete confidentiality from the transcriber.

How will I use the information from these interviews?

I will share portions of my transcripts with my dissertation committee for the purposes of data analysis and general understanding. I plan to use extensive material from the interviews in the way of excerpts, vignettes, and profiles that will be presented in the participants’ own words. I plan to use this material in my doctoral dissertation, presentations at professional conferences, published research articles, books, and courses I may teach. By signing this form, you are giving me a release to use the interview material as described above.

What if you decide not to follow through with the interviews?

The participant, without penalty or prejudice, has the right to withdraw from the study at any time during the interviews. However, because I need to use this material in order to proceed with my doctoral dissertation, I would ask, if necessary, that the participant withdraw before the final interview so that I can make alternate arrangements. At your request, I will supply you with a copy of interview tapes. You have a right to request any material from your interviews be withheld, and I ask you to exercise that right within thirty (30) days after the final interview.

The participant cannot expect to benefit financially from this in any way, and the researcher is not obligated to financially remunerate the participant. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at (413) 549-0937 or at carat@educ.umass.edu

I understand and agree to the terms listed above.

Participant’s Printed Name

Participant’s Signature and Date

Researcher’s Printed Name

Researcher’s Signature and Date
THREE PROFILES

Tom’s Profile
Rural Vocational Education Teacher

Tom teaches ninth through twelfth grade students in a rural, vocational high school. Tom described the majority of his students as white and as belonging to the “underclass,” meaning most of his students are of low socio-economic status. At the time of the interviews, Tom had been teaching for 27 years, and had been enrolled in a doctoral program in teacher education.

I have not radically changed anything that I did before.... One of the questions on the MCAS last year was... [from] Mary Chestnut’s... Civil War Diary.... She was in Charleston when Fort Sumter was attacked. They took this very obscure passage from her diary and then asked the kids to answer some inferential questions. We... spent a lot of time talking about it. [The students] did it really miserably.... The questions were quite subtle. They had to infer whose side Mary Chestnut was on, and, of course,... it wasn’t obvious from the passage... whether she was [from the] North or South. If you knew who Mary Chestnut was, then you already knew.... Afterwards, we went through the passage, we went through the questions, we looked at the language of the questions, looked at the language of the diary entry.... I would say that we spent at least half a week going through this passage.... They had to write an essay in response to it too. We talked about the essays, [and] we talked about... the vocabulary,... both in the diary passage and in the questions.... What else did I do? I have taught grammar for years.... So, there are several grammar questions on the MCAS too.

They way I... tie writing to Shakespeare is that they write a major essay on every act. They do five essays on the play and a sixth one on a theme that runs through the whole play. For instance, one of my best essays this year came from a student who wrote about how Shakespeare manipulates the audience through the use of dramatic irony.... It was a beautiful and a very high level [essay]. I am not taking any credit for this kid. This kid is a genius.... We do a lot digging in class,... and I encourage [students] to steal everything they hear in class. They do that kind of writing, which the MCAS... tells them to do.... But, I have always done that. That is not something that I do because MCAS showed [up three] years ago.... The last week before the MCAS I take them through a poem.... We do very close reading of poetry.... I take one poem, and we really thrash it out.... I give them a sheet [with] 18 points: Who is the speaker? What is the setting? What is the time? What is the season? What is the major theme? What is the figurative language? There are 18 things they can ask themselves to guide themselves through analysis of the poem.... We do it the week before because the test will ask them for a detailed analysis of a piece or a passage. One year it was a very obscure passage from a Thomas Wolfe novel.... I am not sure that it does much good. [MCAS] is the kind of thing... that you really don’t study for very effectively.
I don't believe in [MCAS] anyway. I think it is classist [and] racist....It is a complete fakery as far as I am concerned. It is sorting out the haves from the have-nots and punishing the have-nots. The kids going to college are going to go to college whether they do well on the MCAS or not. They will certainly pass it enough to get their diploma. The kids that don't pass it are denied a diploma, and they are only segment of the high school population [for whom] a high school diploma has any meaning. It has no meaning to kids going on to school. In that way, I foresee that it won't work....It is going to punish the bottom rung of a classist society, and it is destructive. I consider it to be immoral on that basis....The politicians are using it to bash the teachers who are already stressed and strained and working....I have always said there is a million incompetent teachers out there, but even the incompetent ones are putting in the soldier's duty every day....You are taking a section of the working class and beating them up, and we have already been beaten up for decades....Everyone loves to blame the teachers for everything....It is an easy political football....Everybody spends 12 years sitting in front of their teachers. So, everyone presumes that they are experts on what the situation is in teaching, and they can say and do anything they want....They particularly love to blame the drug problems, the discipline problems, the lack of knowledge problems [on teachers]....So, whenever you are looking for something that is wrong, education can be blamed for everything and is.

My school went through all this...about giving free breakfast, free lunch and then...a big party after the MCAS....We put signs all over the building,...little booster signs [that read], “Do well on MCAS.” I never speak against it in front of the students. I don't speak in favor of it, but....I do tell the kids that it would be silly not to try and do well. Kids are strained already....[The] majority of them come from very poor homes. Our students come from 23 different towns. Some of them are on the bus an hour and a half each [way]....Our school has had...terrible scores on the MCAS....Kids come to our school because they are non-academic [students]. Many of them are quite brilliant and smart, but they are not particularly academic. They are not interested. They spend a week in academics and then a week in shop....They love the school, and I try to impress upon them that when they take the test, they are representing not only themselves, but they are painting a profile of our school. I don't know if that does any good or not, but that is all I ever say [to students].

[The students] hate [MCAS]....There have been many stories in the newspaper about our low scores....Several [students] refused to answer the questions. They wrote nonsense answers, or obscene answers, or drew pictures, or just wrote “I can’t do this.”...Last year I had two students refuse to take the test. The administration removed them from the room, and they were...talked into taking the test, but then they all responded with nonsense answers anyway....It is a very disturbing....It is a ridiculously stupid experiment....done without much forethought....[MCAS embodies] all the old Puritan ideas about “it ain't no good if it ain't hard.” It’s a brutal test. I could not pass the math and science, and neither could any of my colleagues in the fine arts curriculum,...and neither could the legislature. It would hilarious to make the legislature to take the test. They would never do it, but it would be interesting to see them try....The kids despise the test [because] they know it is going to make them look bad. They know
that they are not going to pass it, so they hate it. Nor are they convinced by any of the rhetoric that we push at them about trying hard....because they can see through it, [and] that is not through our concern for them, but our concern for our school’s reputation. They are not sophisticated enough to know about principals getting fired for lousy performance on the MCAS.

I think [MCAS] really borders on immorality...because it is victimizing a vulnerable bottom drawer segment of the population. People in Wellesley where the median income is $175,000 a year...are passing the MCAS....The private school kids don’t have to take it. So it is blatantly classist. I am aware of that because of the class of the students in my school are bottom drawer. They are on welfare. They are pregnant at 14....[The] single parent home is the rule....Alcoholism, sexual abuse, all this stuff is the constant theme in the population that I am teaching, and they are all flunking the MCAS. So starting this year that segment of our kids will be headed for a non-diploma experience at the end of high school....Nothing is going to be proved by this MCAS test, and a lot of damage is going to be done, and millions and millions of dollars are being spent. I would love to know how many millions. [Governor] Cellucci is acting as if he has saved the public schools by imposing all this stuff.

English teachers...are presented with an impossible chore. I have reached June every single year thinking, “Oh my God, we have [gotten] nothing done.”...How can you teach all that [the kids need]?....I console myself with the portfolio at the end of the year. They have to have a 60-page typed portfolio, every one of my students....That is more writing than I did in high school and [undergraduate] college put together....There is nothing you can mention that I couldn’t easily be convinced that I need to do in my classroom. We need to do more critical analysis of literature, [and] more public speaking. Kids need to write more. Even with that little sad portfolio at the end of year, I am convinced that we didn’t do enough writing, or that I didn’t get enough conferencing in with the kids. I probably conferenced with each kid about 10 times during the year. It should be 25. It should be weekly....I need to teach grammar more completely....The kids should do a little drama....There is no end to what I need to include in the curriculum....This is a constant nightmare for me....I only feel good about teaching when I am letting [students] dictate the pace. If they want to spend an entire hour and a half discussing and getting into a fight over some speech in Shakespeare, I am not going to close it down and say we have to move on to Act II or Act IV....What is the point of moving on to the next thing until it takes its own dynamic course in the classroom? And, I do that all the time. Ergo, we finish Shakespeare just before Christmas vacation. It is not that we haven’t done anything else, but I don’t keep going, “Let’s go. Let’s go.”

[My students have an independent reading requirement, where they read] 600 pages a trimester [or] 1800 pages for the year....The accountability in that reading program is that they have to show up at my desk with the book, and we chat about the book, and I flip the book over and start reading, and ask them to tell me what is going on in that passage. And, I do that three or four times around in the book. Usually it is immediately apparent whether or not the kid has read the book. I only care that they have done the reading. I don’t care what the reading is. They read the most god-awful trash,
some of them. It is still possible for them to fool you.... You can get around that by... giving them time in class to read, like 20 minutes at the end of a period, or sometimes... I will let them read the entire session for an hour and a half.... They are reading in your class and you can see the progress being made that way.... I have become more and more to believe that learning is only happening when the student is writing, talking, and doing something. They aren't learning much when I am up there yakking.... I can hold a classroom's attention, but I don't think they learn much when I am doing the talking..... That's... my philosophy of teaching.

[MCAS] is pitched at a high level.... The MCAS literature that sticks out in my mind is pretentious and picayune. For instance, a couple years ago they asked kids to make interpretations on Mary Chestnut's diaries. She was in Charleston, South Carolina when Fort Sumter was fired on. She was an upper class southern woman. They gave a very short excerpt from her diary, and the kids were meant to make all these inferences, some of them very complicated like what class was this woman in. My kids don't even know what class is about.... They think everybody is the same class, and that is another myth that America likes to promote—that we are all the same,... [but] we are not all the same. So here is the MCAS asking them to understand the class status of Mary Chestnut in pre-Civil War South. Then they ask inferential geography questions,... "Does this entry take place in Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, New York, none of the above." It is "none of the above." They can't do it.... It is [supposed to be] an English thing in your ability on how you read. [Yet,] you have to know where Charleston is. I guess that's it—a geography question was on the English test.

Every moment I spend accommodating the test... it doesn't feel very good. What is my loss? It is essentially a loss of atmosphere. It doesn't feel good to me to be teaching toward that test. It seems a little plastic. In other words I am not teaching them to read closely because there is a joy in... that kind of reading. But, I am teaching it because I am trying to get them to look good on a test. It is not a good feeling.... That is a loss of atmosphere anyway.

To me the whole thing is a big charade. I think it will explode. The first set of kids that are denied diploma, [the state] will have a real mess on their hands. I hope they will.... The thing that gets me is that the whole "profession" has folded up its tents and run off into the night. There is no protest movement.... The teachers are saying they think it is fine.... I think that... historically teachers are a flock of sheep. They do what they are told to do, and they run at the sight of the first bullet. I don't see a lot of outrage in the teachers. I think teachers know it is a dishonest contraption, but they are not very interested in voicing that.

I am failing every day of the week.... I didn't get a fraction done of what I would have like to have gotten done. On the other hand, I am doing everything those stupid little strands [in the curriculum frameworks] say you should do. It is a description of what you should be doing anyway without being told by a bunch of block heads down at DOE.... The problem is... what do they think the ideal teacher looks like, or... never mind the ideal teacher... a competent teacher?... Teaching is full of incompetence, so is law, so
is medicine, so is everything else. Big surprise....I don’t see the bargain in [education] reform anywhere. I see a lot of rhetoric. I see a lot of politics, and I see a lot of “Hey look at me. I have done this.” [from Governor] Cellucci and the DOE. [They say,] “We are going to get those damn teachers,” and the stupid ones are running right out of the building. Of course, there are no new ones to come in....So big deal. [The] DOE has figured out how to kick out all the stupid teachers and they have...no teachers to put in their place.

[MCAS is based on] the old capitalist myth that got knocked around during the 90s [that] the Japanese are taking over the world, and we are stupid now and our school system is a bunch of baloney....America has never been more prosperous during this time when apparently our educational system is so hopelessly [messed] up.....All of this is built on hysteria and myth, and it ends up punishing innocent people, and no one has ever convinced me of the crime of giving a kid who can’t pass this test a diploma. Where is the crime? Where is the destruction? I am so sick and tired of hearing about all these businesses [say]...they get people in and they can’t spell....I have no students in my classrooms that cannot read and write. None. I have a lot that can’t spell anything....Often times...[with] the people who are saying [teachers] don’t teach grammar, [if] you listen to them in the next five minutes of their verbal interaction, they will make five grammatical mistakes.

It was the myth of the Golden Ages...[that] there was this time when we all had to take Latin and we all had to do this and it was so wonderful....My education in 1950s was appallingly bad. My...least accomplished freshman does more writing and reading than I did in all four years of high school. There was no Golden Age. I really believe that there is much in education now that is immensely better than it was in the Golden Age, whenever you want to believe the golden age is. People believe the golden age was when they were in high school whether it was the middle 70s,...60s,...50s, [or]...40s [and] that...their education was fantastic and what is going on now is appallingly wretched. That is silly. What doesn’t get discussed in all of this is race. The schools that are falling apart are the urban schools that are stressed financially [and] that are essentially black, Asian, [or] Puerto Rican minorities....That is what is going on in the urban and rural poor schools; it is a class war, and nobody [cares],...otherwise, why would these schools be in such wretched condition?

This year we were meant to sign an oath...[that] we understood that if we did cheat [on MCAS] we would lose our certification....People started grumbling about that.....This is all 48 hours before the test started, and the rumor swept the state that somebody was going to sue the DOE over this pledge, so at the last minute we didn’t have to sign the oath. This is just emblematic of how bull-headed all these [officials] are. It is ridiculous....[MCAS] also promotes the lie that it is the teacher’s fault if [students] don’t pass the test. [It is part of] that...whole punishment paradigm. If your school has poor numbers, then the DOE is going to take over your school, and they are going to fire the principal, and the Massachusetts teachers have to take a test....It is like saying, you have cancer [and] if you don’t stop acting as if you have cancer, we are going to kill you. The logic is horrifying....I have yet to hear a single convincing discussion of what the
point of all this is. I know all the rhetoric about the myths and the lies [such as] the Japanese [taking us over], [and how]... corporate America can’t hire [a] secretary that knows how to spell. We can read tracks about education written in 1850 that sound exactly the same.

[MCAS is about] how... we sort people out socially. There are all these people that don’t read English, that don’t spell [well], that don’t know the difference between an adjective and an adverb, that don’t know how to do math problems so that they can get into MIT. They don’t know all this stuff, so we have got to sort these people out, so that the corporate capitalist machine can tell who to hire and who not to hire....It can all be read in Marxist terms....that it is a class war. That is my real objection to the MCAS....The other thing I see MCAS doing is saying, “Look we have all these stupid teachers whom we have been paying $20,000 a year to in an economy where the minimum wage should be about $40,000, and they are not doing their job.”....You have heard it as well as I all over the place: “Give the teachers their raises based on the scores.” It is unbelievable.

I remember once I was at one of my niece’s weddings,... and there was this prissy little secretary sitting across [from me]....The word got out that I was an English teacher, so she sniffed and started complaining about [how] nobody knows how to spell any more. I said, “I don’t know how to spell very well either....There is the whole notion coming along...that you have to take people’s level of communication from where...they are stationed.”....Spelling is arbitrarily decided. It is not a real thing. C-A-T is not real, except that you and I agree it is. So philosophically, grammar and spelling are all just arbitrary things where a certain class defines all other classes on their ability to meet this or not....The fact that one of my kids can’t spell scissors and I can [really does not mean much more than] I am Mr. Piss Pot Intelligent, and I belong to a class that knows how to spell scissors....The kid may know 10 times of what I know in terms of technology [or] carpentry. The canon is always established by those people on the top, and in some ways, it is established to keep all the people below that line right where they belong.

I just think the whole testing thing, [and]... all political talk about education is [a] knee jerk [reaction]. It is not motivated by real concern of the issues....Every breathing person in America has a son or a daughter or a grandchild or a cousin or a niece or a nephew that they see as being either pushed forward or inhibited by the education system. The problems in our educational system are really reflections of deep societal illnesses—like children not having enough to eat, like divorce—but have nothing really directly to do with school. The kids that we get sent to us are victims of [these social ills], and they don’t perform well [on MCAS]. So to start trying to fix what is wrong with America in its vast societal canvas, you don’t start from the classroom and work backwards....It is all [too] easy.
Diane's Profile
Urban Teacher

Diane teaches ninth and tenth grade students in an inner city high school where the majority of her students are Latino and African-American. At the time of the interviews, Diane had taught for 16 years. She had taught a number of years in private schools as well as in an urban vocational high school. Diane recently had been involved in a number of professional experiences related to standards-based education reform in Massachusetts.

Actually I think [because of MCAS and the curriculum frameworks, my teaching] is much focused than it used to be, and it is much more skill-based than it once was... Standards-based planning really forces the teacher to plan with the assessment in mind and the criteria for assessment before the tasks are planned. And, therefore, you do not waste time doing things that you are not going... to assess for. I think it is... much clearer to the kids what they are supposed to be doing.... Writing the rubric is extremely time consuming, especially in the beginning because you are not experienced with it. You constantly are forced to look at your criteria and then start thinking, “Am I assuming that kids know how to do this, or I am going to have to teach them how to do this?”.... You keep modifying the assessment based on whatever answers you have to those questions.... If you are asking kids to make posters to display knowledge, you have to make a decision: Are you going to be judging the poster on how good it looks?.... In order for you to use that as criteria, you really have to check to make sure the kids know what is in your mind as “looking good.” Do you expect color? What do you consider being neat, and what do you consider being messy? So, you have to plan on somehow presenting that information to them before you can assess them because you have to make sure that they are really cognizant of what you are looking for.... When you are teaching on the high school level, you make assumptions that kids have learned some of this obvious material before ninth grade—that they know what a good poster looks like, and that they can produce one, [and that] they know what a complete sentence is. And, you make those kinds of assumptions, which you shouldn’t make, but you still do because you can’t start from square one all the time. [With] standards-based planning, you can’t ask for something that they don’t know how to do, and I think we were doing that before.

[It’s] not necessarily [that I won’t teach something if it is not on the MCAS], but that is not going to be your focus, especially in an inner city school system where your skill-base is so low. They are not able to answer open ended questions, and they really need a lot of concrete practice in finding character traits within the text, [or] finding words and putting all those words together to determine mood.... When I taught at a private school... where the kids’ skill level was much higher, we [got] into very analytical areas and a lot of moral, ethical discussions, which would almost be a waste of time here as far as the MCAS goes, because although they need that kind of questioning, it is a lot of emptiness too with regard to skills.

In standards-based planning when we talk about character, we do very little talking about character; we usually deal with an activity....[The students] will have text
in front of them, and they will be asked to find words that are directly related to the physical appearance of a character, and they will circle them. They will be asked to underline words that talk about [a] character’s actions, and they will be asked to write what those actions might tell us about the character, but that is only after they have identified the actions of the character. I never did that before....I have to say that [before] I assumed the kids knew that there were words in [the text] that talked about physical description....[Before] we would have discussions [with] mostly me talking, talking about what a character was doing and what it might mean and what a character might be thinking and where this might go. It was fun to talk, but it didn’t require too much participation on the part of a student except for looking attentive, nodding your head once in a while, [and] watching me. They would leave, and I would smile and say, “Wow, we had a good class.” And even now,...kids will come in [from other classes] and say, “Oh, all we do is read and discuss; read and discuss; read and discuss.” And, I go, “Oh, it is not getting you where you are going to need to get in order to pass the MCAS.”

All the MCAS is doing is being very concrete about where are you getting your answers from. “How are you thinking about your answer? What is leading you to the answer that you are giving us? Find it and show it to me in the text.”....The MCAS is not a punitive test of what kids don’t know. It gives them credit for having any kind of idea at all as long as it is supported in some way, and that idea and support can be communicated in...writing. And, I don’t think that that is a bad thing....When you teach writing...for MCAS, there are very specific strategies, and you don’t put a lot of fluff in it, except for the long composition. You answer the question and you get out, otherwise you are going to get into trouble....The MCAS is in [my] mind [when I plan]....More importantly, what is in my mind is having them be able to write something with a clear focus and with support, something that makes sense...because that will do them very well in the MCAS, but [also] that is what they need to have to be able to do in life. They need to be able to write, they need to have a focus, they need to be able to communicate their ideas to somebody else in writing...So, yeah, it is test prep. “This is what this is. Respond to it. This is a good response; this is not such a good response. This is where you need to be.”....[I] show them models. Some of the models I have gotten from MCAS....All English language arts teachers are [given MCAS packets] through the district....I know also that there is an [item analysis] breakdown:...How many kids answered what question wrong; what was the percentage of answers;...how many answered [question ] A....If you really wanted to teach the test, I suppose you could go in and read all that data.

These kids here are I think overwhelmed by [MCAS]....They also have an unrealistic idea of what they can do....When we go over the rubric and...the models and I ask them to grade their own [writing], most of them will give themselves a far higher grade than they should have....MCAS forces a certain criteria. It does not allow for the easy A.....There are not two different standards of what is good and what is considered right; there is one standard....Ten years ago I was kind of afraid to teach composition because it is very obvious what is a good paper and what is not a very good paper. [Yet,] trying to articulate to a student why they got a B instead of an A was a really difficult
thing....The other gain I think with rubrics [is that] kids are really forced to evaluate themselves. There is much more active participation that happens in a standards-based classroom, especially with the MCAS in mind. Students no longer can be passive.... They need to practice what I am asking them to practice, and if they practice it, they are going to get better at it and they are going to be successful...[and] that practice gives them confidence to be able to do things....They have the concrete pieces now, so when we get into something a little bit more abstract, they still are anchored in the concrete.

My private theory is that when the got rid of welfare they were hoping that they would get rid of the minorities and the people who were living off of welfare. And, I believe that MCAS is just another way of doing that. With computers becoming such an integral part of our society, I do believe that all of the records of all of us are going to be tied together so that if someone does go to apply for assistance—and they do still get assistance if only for a short time—that school records are going to be reviewed, that court records are going to be reviewed,...and they are going refuse services to people whose [children] do not go to school [and who] do not perform on the MCAS test....There is something on the books that says if your child is not attending school then you won't receive your services....I do believe that...we are going to start refusing to give diplomas to kids who do not pass the MCAS test, and the majority of the kids who are not going to pass are going to be the minorities in the inner cities. The state already knows that. The state...is sending a message, “You can’t make it, [so] get out because we are not going to give you a diploma and we are not going to let you stay on welfare either. So bye.”....Maybe it is not a plan that has been discussed around the board, but I think that is at the base of it....I think the message is also being told, “Don’t come to Massachusetts because...this test is awful, and you are not going to be able to pass it.” All the minorities kids aren’t passing. “[If] you are minority, don’t come here.” I believe that to be true.... We are talking the advent of Big Brother here.

Teaching in the inner city, these kids have...so much [of an] information gap. Their skills are so low.....When I talk about gaps, I talk about the major gaps. Culturally things that seem to be so obvious to us, these kids don’t know about. They don’t know the Beatles are. They don’t know where Boston is. They don’t know that Hartford is....to our South, and they can’t point in which direction the Atlantic Ocean is....When you are dealing with that, you’re suddenly at a real loss to start talking about ideas because they have such little general cultural knowledge....The state doesn’t understand that, and so when the state threatens to come in and take over schools that are underperforming, my answer to that is, “Yes, come here. Come show me what I am doing wrong. Come prove to me that you can do a better job, because you have no clue. You are sitting in an office pontificating about things when you have no clue, because you are not there in the trenches day to day.”....When you are dealing with that kind of a population, when you start talking about standards and you start talking about complex thought, these kids have no thoughts. They really don’t....And so, when I say that MCAS has given me focus, and it has given me the ability to be very concrete and skill-based, and force my children into participating...because let’s read and discuss doesn’t work with these kids at all.
If I would say that there were losses, it would probably be losses for me as a teacher in doing things I like to do, rather than things I should be doing [such as] maybe a film unit where we look at films and talk...and write about characters, do diagrams, [use] graphic organizers about character or plot or comparison contrast, or things like that. I don’t know if that is such a great example in the fact that I still do that to some extent, but maybe not as much....But, [the students] are so needy in those skills that are going to be necessary to pass the MCAS test that I have given those things up.

[When I talk about kids having low skills, what I mean is that] if they write, everything is a simple sentence or it is a long run-on. Nothing is in paragraphs; everything is one long paragraph, and these are my best ninth graders....There is no consistent verb tense. Students do not know the difference between nouns, verbs, [or] adjectives. They do not understand that a word changes depending on how it is used in a sentence....And so, their thoughts are very obvious, very concrete, very trite. They are very third grade or very second grade....They will not use specifics, and they will not answer the question that you have asked....Their reading level must be around the fifth grade for many of them; very few are on grade level with reading. Ninety percent of them have an attendance problem.

I tutored MCAS in an after school [MCAS] program....[What they did was] practice, take the test, discuss, look at skills, look at grading yourself, look at rubrics, look at what they wanted, look at questions. It was an hour and a half two days a week after school for 12 weeks. We had kids on a four-week basis....The kids that came to the MCAS tutoring, which was free for them, were kids that were motivated anyway....I think we got most of them writing to a needs improvement level. They at least understood what the test was asking them and the kinds of things they needed to do in order to be successful. They could not leave out...the response questions. They could not blow off the long composition. They had to do these things, if they were going to pass....If they did them to the best of their ability, they really [made] an honest effort, they were probably going to be okay....[MCAS] has given me an awful lot of opportunity to earn money and practice things....I did sign up for a workshop in the development of an MCAS guide. In the city they want to put together a booklet to help teachers help students pass the MCAS. So, I did sign up for that....I am interested in the test. I am interested to see what [the state]...considers important....in order to be able to help [students].

There is so much discussion that they will never be able to hold back a diploma because a kid doesn’t pass the MCAS test, [but]...nobody knows if that is true or not....And, I guess people have watched the state change their minds so many times about things that they just think that this is just one other thing that has come down the pike that is going change. And, I think people are angry that....they are threatening being punitive with those schools are underperforming. I am doing the best I can.... “Come on down and show me how I can be better. Come on down,...and when Johnny won’t pick his head up off the desk, you show me how you are going to make sure that he is going to pass the MCAS test. Come on. Show me. Show me. Because I am going to sit here and critique you Mr. Person from the DOE, who is so smart.” As a teacher I am sick of being
blamed for what these kids don’t know because it is not as if they are not being
taught....[In the] media...it is always the teacher....The teachers are awful. “We are
going to test the math teachers because the kids aren’t doing the math.” Come on.

What does it mean to be teaching English? I guess it means that I have to reassess
things that I have done in the past, my past beliefs about what needs to be taught versus
what somebody else has already decided needs to be taught....Realigning some of my
own opinions with somebody else’s perspective...isn’t necessarily good or bad....What I
see as my understanding is [that the state] wants kids to come out with some very real
skills. They want some very real perspectives. They have given us strong guidelines,
which they want us to follow, and so it makes it easier not to go off on tangents that
might or might not be...real productive.....What the state is asking the kids to do on this
test is to apply their knowledge very actively into real world situations, which requires
not just spitting back information, but being able to apply the information that they have.
And, that is really active. I think for too long education was not an active thing; it was a
very passive thing. Students [were] taking in information, spitting back information, but
there wasn’t any application or the application was very minimal....With the formation of
standards, [the state] is asking [students] not only to know things,...but to be to apply
that knowledge, and therefore, that is a skill that has to be practiced...in the
classroom....Rather than a teacher asking for information that students can spit back, the
teacher has to think about that information and how it can be applied and then be able to
measure whether the student got the concept that they can transfer....I think that inner
city students as a whole are much too passive in their thought process, and I think there
are many reasons for that. I think that MCAS measures very well the fact that they
cannot think beyond spitting back information.

Because these students...can’t do that, doesn’t mean that they are never going to
be able to do that. Educational psychology tells us that the brain develops at different
rates for different people; so some people get to that abstract level much earlier than
others do. That doesn’t mean that they aren’t ever going to get there....When you have
MCAS being given to you in the tenth grade and it determines whether you are going to
graduate or not, it is measuring...an abstract ability that even the experts will tell [you] is
just being developed at 15 and 16....So, [to] penalize them in the tenth grade and not give
them a diploma in some ways is very, very unfair, because you are going to get these kids
who are really and truly going to give up and drop out, and, it is not that they don’t have
knowledge; they don’t have what MCAS wants [or] they just don’t have it at that time.
And to penalize them really for the rest of their lives at age 16 is unfair. It is more than
unfair, it is cruel and unusual....I believe that there needs to be some kind of stakes, but
the stakes have always been getting in to colleges. What is the SAT?....Most kids
understand that kind of measure, and there has to be some high-stakes testing.

What they are really talking about is they are talking about inner city kids, and
they want...inner city not to continue the cycle of poverty. They want inner city kids to
have knowledge so they can go on and get good jobs. They want inner city kids to learn
English....I think that the majority of problems [are] in the cities....That is where the
state is spending its most money on social services [and] on education, and I think...the
state wants to stop that...[Yet,] now [students] are giving up in the ninth grade. They are
giving up in the tenth grade. You look at the drop out rates in [my city] and you will find
that they are going...to skyrocket when this becomes something for graduation. It is
definitely going to divide the haves and the have-nots. It is dividing them now....Yes I
do [think this is a movement to keep the white man in power]. I have seen it in attitudes
of my friends...[with] people who are just part of the system, and who are angry at
affirmative action, which there isn’t any [of] anymore, and I have seen it here within this
system [with] older white males making some really vocal complaints because they are
not able to move up in a system that is promoting multiculturalism. So, it is almost like a
reverse discrimination, and there is a lot of complaining about that.

The idea that MCAS is...a reformist conspiracy or not,...I kind of feel both
ways....If you do any kind of research on minorities in their success rate as far as
education goes, you are going to find the numbers appalling. With the Latino population
growing at the rate it is growing in this country, we do need to do something to educate
this population. We need to somehow instill in them, in their culture, and send the
message that their children need to be educated. We need to do that as a country....In
order to compete as a country, we need to have educated people....So standards are very
necessary. We do need them. On the other end, we are having a lot of people here who
can’t meet the standard because of language or previous skills, only now it matters. I
think that was always true. I think when we had the exodus from Europe, [with] the
Poles, and the Irish and everyone else,...they created schools for themselves....And, to a
great degree, we had an industrial society [where] there were lots of...manual labor jobs,
and education wasn’t as important as it is today....Now the whole global society,
especially the United States has switched so that if you are going to compete especially in
a computer driven world, you are going to need that abstract reasoning.

You have to have a damn strong foundation before you can go on to the next step.
I am not the believer that says you can run before you can walk....And, that is what
MCAS is all about. MCAS isn’t about a right answer; it is the answer that you have and
how you came to that answer....Rarely [do I get to abstract reasoning with students], and
that is the discouraging part. It is because you are struggling with language....So often
either what you are asking them to do, they haven’t read it;...or they have read it in such
a way that they have read the words, but not internalized what it is saying; or they have
read it and just decided they have put enough effort in and they are not going to do any
more; or they just totally misinterpret the whole thing, and they will only read it once....It
is very discouraging. So many times I do the same thing over and over and over again
with the hopes that one of these days light is going to dawn on Marblehead and they are
going to say, “Ooh this is why. I know how to do this and I can get the next step.”....I
have seen improvements with kids on a daily basis. I am most discouraged on a final
exam that they don’t transfer anything, even though they have practiced it and practiced it
and practiced it....Even though they can do it and they know they can do it, they won’t.
They make the choice not to because it requires participation and it requires effort, and
they make the choice not to.
Of course MCAS is going to come back and haunt me as a teacher....It has to. The success rates are available to each one of us....The fourth grade teachers were feeling like...the kids’ success in the English language arts was a measure of what they had done or not done, when in fact it was a culmination of what [students] had done since kindergarten....I don’t take that on....If a kid is coming to me and is not passing the English Language arts test in the eighth grade and the kid is absent 25 percent of the time, there is not too much that I am going to be able to do with that kid to help him pass that test....The test just gets harder, so if they are not passing in the eighth grade, chances are that they are not going to be passing in the tenth grade. If they are passing with a needs improvement [score], chances are that they will fail on the tenth grade test because it just gets harder.

There has to be some other measure, but I don’t know what that is. I mean I have seen portfolios. Portfolios are a nightmare...to grade. There is so much in the MCAS that we don’t celebrate [and] that we can’t measure that these kids can do....I am not one of these great minds [who thinks] up [solutions to these dilemmas]....I do know that kids have been passed along that don’t have the skills . I know that we have failed to educate huge populations for whatever reason. But, I also don’t think that the MCAS should be the end all to everything either. Hey, we all know that some kids can take tests and some kids can’t. We know that...That is in the research....How can you deny a kid a diploma [knowing that]?

I absolutely love what I do....Why? Because when the bulb does go off [and] they do get it suddenly,...it’s rewarding. I don’t care how many times you reach out to someone,...[when] you make the connection, it is rewarding. I can do that every day, and I can do it on all kinds of different levels. There is much more that goes on in the classroom besides an exchange of knowledge in English....It is a constantly changing situation, and I wouldn’t do anything else....I really try to fill in cause and effect in conversation with them or in...talking about literature. I really try and make them think about...how it relates in the real world. I really try and develop that kind of imaginative thinking, so that they can hopefully then transfer that onto the test.

[State officials] have no clue what teaching in an inner city school is like, [or] what an inner city student population does....They are ignoring that there is any kind of problem at all, or they are blaming the teachers for the problem rather than a much larger issue....You are setting up a whole population of kids to fail....Those people who come to school every day to attempt to teach [students] and make a connection and improve their lives, you are really kicking them when they are down....They are already overwhelmed with what they are seeing and knowing that they can’t fix it, but only a little bit maybe. They are getting a double brunt of it....[I would say to the state officials.] “Don’t make it a graduation requirement.”....[I] want to go back to...the fact that 16 year olds...are just beginning to...perform on an abstract level....That doesn’t mean that they are never going to be able to [perform on the MCAS test]. It just means that they can’t do it right now....But, the way it stands right now, you are branding them as failures at 16,...[and] you setting them up for failure for the rest of their lives, and 16 is pretty damn [young] to be a failure for the rest of your life.
Mike’s Profile
Suburban Teacher

Mike is a ninth and tenth grade teacher in a middle class suburban high school where the majority of his students are white. He has taught in the same school for seven years, and has his master’s degree in education. In addition, Mike had participated in the MCAS scoring process.

Pre-MCAS, we had decided on specific works that each grade would read. This was necessarily influenced by the coming of MCAS test....When I first started [teaching], I am not sure if we had definite requirements, but certainly I picked up where the person before me left off [with] A Farewell to Arms and The Great Gatsby....[For] our curriculum...we had a 100 word vocabulary list, which over the course of the year is not particularly demanding....Ninth grade had a serious grammar component—knowing parts of speech [and] different kinds of clauses and phrases....[The] sophomore [curriculum] was all mechanics, commas, [and] punctuation....We still have a lot of freedom, and I don’t anticipate losing a lot of freedom frankly because our test scores are good because of demographics.

A lot of people feel threatened [by MCAS]....In English I think we are a pretty well organized department, and we have been working on a curriculum...for a while....I have taught sophomores for the last eight years, and most of what I do to prepare them for the MCAS is work on strategies to answer the questions....The biggest thing is I try and give them a number of the past questions on the tests, and I worked out a specific methodology for approaching the open-ended questions....First,...there is a prompt that comes before...the reading passages. So, I have them read the blurb, and I tell them to underline the key words and phrases. Basically, there are two problems....One [is] that [students] will go too fast, and they don’t know what they doing. So I have them underlining,...[which] makes them slow down....Then I have them go to the actual written responses for the open-response and underline the key words in the question, and count the number of tasks that the question requires, and write the number down....I attended a workshop on “What is proficient?” that the DOE put on, and, we scored [the MCAS] and saw how they scored [it]....When you look at the rubric,...[you will notice] your score goes down if you don’t answer both parts of the question. So, it seems like a pretty simple strategy for making sure the kids are more aware of what they have to do....After they have done those two tasks, then I have them get into passage....You want....[kids to have] an advanced organizer....My friend who is a reading specialist [says] you comprehend better when you know what you are reading and why you are reading it....So, you basically get the kids to start thinking about it and find out what questions they need to answer [and] what information to look for...so they become more active readers.

MCAS multiple choice [questions] are ridiculously easy if you compare them to other standardized tests....Many of the questions just by sheer process of elimination you can get the answer [to] or improve your chances of getting it right....I give a passage from the SATs, which is really beyond most sophomores,....and I will have them use those multiple choice testing strategies....Process of elimination is the big one....There is
a main idea question. They will give you a detail. They will give you something that is too broad [and] something that is too narrow, and those will be the types of wrong answers.

For writing, the thing I keep focusing on is [what] I call it TS—topic sentence or thesis [statement]....They have to have three things [in developing a topic sentence]. One, it has to be a complex sentence...with a subordinate clause, and the second thing they have to do is use the words from the prompt, and the third thing they have to do is suggest why they think so....I give sentence starters like although or because [or] since, and...it tends to force them to think...more complexly by making qualifications on their basic statement....I don’t actually give them as many...five paragraph essays. I tend to give them more paragraphs....If I have them work on a paragraph, they can work on unity, [and] the coherence is much better...in a paragraph than in an essay....They still write the typical five paragraph essay and learn intro, body, conclusion format, but by having them write the paragraphs,...you can teach them the concepts....They are probably doing about four to six [open-response paragraphs] over the course of the semester. I started using rubrics with the MEAP test. It was the same testing that got me into rubrics, but it predated MCAS....One year I developed my own rubric, [which]...was kind of the MCAS rubric, but it was basically more useful for my class....Most English teachers wouldn’t argue with [the] MCAS rubric. Another benefit [of MCAS was]...learning how to do holistic scoring. Starting out as a beginning teacher and not knowing how to grade papers, it took forever. Another big thing on that test is literary terms....I don’t know how many literary terms over the course of a semester [I teach], 10 maybe, maybe more....[I teach] them dramatic irony, dialect, irony, illusion, apostrophe, [and] usually metaphor and simile.

The nice thing about the MCAS test is that it gives...everybody a common goal. It is something to work for. I am not sure that it outweighs the negatives of the test, obviously, but in order to pass the MCAS you need to know this....I want [students] to be able to do their best, which means they need to understand how they are being tested. So, whatever their skills and their innate ability and cultural background add up to,...[I want to ensure] they are penalized as little as possible....The second thing is that some of the stuff that I teach has critical thinking value....Educationally I have no problem teaching it because kids are learning something.

One day when everybody else had professional development,...[my department chair and I] analyzed the entire test. We looked at every question. We looked to see...where in our curriculum the kids would know [certain aspects of the test and] where they would have been exposed to it, and we looked at how doable were these questions....[We looked] at the results of individual questions to see how our kids did compared to the state. And, we have worked on a curriculum several times, which means it is kind of forming like a template of what our semester looks like usually and where we are going to work in [MCAS] information....I think that improves our awareness of what [we] need to teach.
The biggest indicator of how well you are going to do [on MCAS] is demographics, and we have a middle class community. I would imagine if you were in [an inner city] that would be a different story, because people are on your back. People are complaining because your scores are terrible and they are giving you a hard time. I saw in the newspaper...[that] the state is auditing seven communities, [and all of them are urban schools]....[State officials] are going to pick on these people, and I imagine their life has got to be much more miserable than ours.

The focus of having a concrete goal [is a gain]. You can't beat a concrete goal....You have kids working towards something. They have another reason to learn. As much as it is kind of manufactured and as much as...it didn’t even count for the last three years, it focused the kids a little bit. If you said MCAS, their ears perked up....I don’t know how many other benefits that [MCAS] has....I think the frameworks aren't a bad idea. The stupid thing about MCAS is that they are expecting kids to know everything by their sophomore year. You are supposed to be proficient [in] everything in the frameworks by the end of sophomore year, and everything else after that isn’t tested....It is just absurd; you can’t teach all that stuff in two years....But, I really don’t see a lot of benefits to it, other than that kind of focusing....I don’t think I have lost anything because of MCAS...because I think the English test portion is really geared...towards what people are doing in the classroom....I don’t like the high-stakes idea, but I didn’t have a problem with the actual test because at least we were working toward what we were doing in the classroom.

My prediction was that MCAS would not last more...than 10 years. Our SPED director said he gave it five....Can you fail 80 percent of the minorities in our state and not have a backlash? I have to say that parents do not support this test....Massachusetts is in the unfortunate position of being the educational leader for the [past] 200 years in our country, and now we are chasing everybody else, [and]....I don’t think it is good educational policy....I think our country follows basically a corporate model [for educational reform]. People want a profit line. They think education will improve if you have a bottom line, which the tests are supposed to be. I think that is what MCAS is doing. It is part of this corporate, capitalist idea that if you make everybody compete, if you give them a bottom line that [they have] to beat, then everything will be productive...[and], education will work like it is suppose to....The main reason [this model won’t work is] because I think MCAS scores are not a matter of learning. I think you are just going to keep getting a distribution [of scores]. I don’t think everybody is going [to] get up to [a high level of achievement]....Everybody is not going to get the same score. It is not Lake Woebegone where all the children are above average....[The state wanting improvements every year] is totally insane....That is the business model. Every year a business is supposed to make more money [just like MCAS scores are supposed to be raised every year]....I just think it is so unrealistic....I think we are in a situation now where the politicians are pushing, and especially [Governor] Cellucci and the conservatives are pushing, for these tests...to prove the public education is bad because I don’t think they agree with the idea of public education at all....Maybe they are scoring some points somewhere politically, but I think the teachers and the parents are closer together on the MCAS test than the power structure in the state.
What is going to happen when 80 percent of the minorities don’t graduate from high school? [There] could be riots.... There will be dropouts, but... I think there will be protests, and protests could get ugly. Why slam the door on so many people? They are people who try. [If] somebody drops out because they have to work—fine—because I do believe that everybody doesn’t have to go to high school.... But, if a kid is working and just doesn’t happen to have a great background, [that is not right].... The kids who aren’t going to pass are probably be pretty low [skill].... The kids [in my school] that are not going to pass it are going to be because of special needs.... What we are doing is entering the unknown. Now we are testing [under] high stakes.... We are aware of ranking.... and the state has come with this thing that you have to improve so much every time, [or risk being taken over by the state].... That is a joke. [Do you] think they are going to run [urban schools] any better than [they are] being run now?

The principal... actually looks at everybody’s exams and gives feedback.... My feeling with this is that my principal feels like... he is covering himself.... We had to give him things that showed him that we were covering the standards, and it was a sizeable amount of material.... If anybody says, “You are not covering the standards. My kid did badly,” he says, “Well,... I require this from the teachers.” So, he is covered. It is documentation. I think he might have presented some of this to the school committee at an appropriate time.... It puts the onus on the teacher.... It seems none of [these mandates] by [themselves] have a huge impact, but it accumulates, and does have an impact eventually.... [Also,] the first requirement.... we had [was] to put these [open-response questions] on the final.... [The] superintendent had this program that basically laid out all the specific things that the kids had to learn based on the frameworks.... [Administration] gave us a book on teaching for the MCAS.... I never really looked at the book because I just did my own thing, but [the] book on teaching the MCAS [had] different worksheets, like prepackaged lessons. And, we did get the new textbooks, which... was kind of a bargaining chip. It gave us some leverage to say that we needed these for the MCAS tests because they were frameworks compliant, and we hadn’t had new textbooks in about 20 years.

There is a schedule for improvement. Schools have to improve a certain amount... if they don’t want to get in trouble with the state.... I expressed my skepticism that this would ever happen.... that we were going to get audited, and like we were going to get into big trouble if our scores didn’t improve to a certain degree. Come get me coppers! They are not a huge impact, but it accumulates, and does have an impact eventually.... [Also,] the first requirement.... we had [was] to put these [open-response questions] on the final.... [The] superintendent had this program that basically laid out all the specific things that the kids had to learn based on the frameworks.... [Administration] gave us a book on teaching for the MCAS.... I never really looked at the book because I just did my own thing, but [the] book on teaching the MCAS [had] different worksheets, like prepackaged lessons. And, we did get the new textbooks, which... was kind of a bargaining chip. It gave us some leverage to say that we needed these for the MCAS tests because they were frameworks compliant, and we hadn’t had new textbooks in about 20 years.

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Every time they talk about how bad a high school is, where is it? Urban [schools]. It is easy to prove things there.

I would say that [the idea that MCAS will provide equal educational opportunity] is equivalent to having everybody in Massachusetts do the high jump, and...everybody gets beat that doesn’t clears the bar. It doesn’t matter how hard they try, and it doesn’t matter if they have one leg [because] every one is going to get the equal treatment.... I think it is a phony argument. We’re going to measure everybody the same, so let’s get a level playing field? I don’t think it is... even logical. Two things I am not sure I accept are one, that education is doing a bad job, and two, that we can make substantial improvements.... I think we are doing a better job than we were in the past, not a worse job. What do we have to rely on? Antidotes and test scores?.... Kids know more now.... [Proponents of the national standards movement and MCAS believe that] Americans will not be competitive if we continue on the path we are on. Let’s look around at the economies right now. People were saying that 20 years ago when Japan was on top, [but] who even questioned America’s dominance? Have we had any substantial changes in education? Things [in education] have been the way they are [now], and our economy is fine. So, really America is not losing a competitive edge due to education, and, in fact, we don’t even look like we are standing to lose [any] competitive edge. Another thing everybody presented was the TIMMS test, [an international math and science test].... The problem with that test was the sampling that took place. In some countries, kids don’t get to go to school that would not do well on the test. And, it was suggested that kids in a few places selected particular groups, like in Japan, to do that. So I really didn’t find any evidence... to prove that there was a problem in education.

I would be laughing so hard at the state thinking... that they can manage people’s lives so well from such a distance.... They can’t do that.... I think people have the right to be the way they want to be. People need opportunities, but we are forcing them to succeed—not literally forcing them succeed because I don’t think the tests will have that effect—but that is a bizarre concept [to think] everybody will pass the test.... It is literally Lake Woebegone,... where all the children are above average. Statistically, [it is] not possible, so we are going to go against reason... It offends my sensibilities.... It doesn’t harm me, but it definitely offends the way I look at things. To me, it is so obviously a politically motivated thing, and for [Governor] Cellucci it’s a gorgeous option to beat up on teachers.... Why do people hate teachers? Cellucci loves to beat up on teachers. He wouldn’t pass the stupid retirement bill. My dad wrote letter to the newspapers, and [said] it made no sense that Cellucci thought these teachers weren’t doing a good job, but he would not let them retire.... Definitely part of the identity of an educator is to feel like you are under fire... People don’t like the job you are doing, and [the] MCAS test is one of those things that people are firing at you.... If I were a math teacher,... I might feel like I was a little nervous.... It is the whole idea of beat up on education.... In some respects I think it is like beating up on an aspect of America. It is this whole [idea] that everybody can succeed. That is an American myth, and it is being played out in the schools. I don’t think any other country really has that view of school—that everybody can succeed, and this is your opportunity.
I would say that any major structural change would yield some improvements in terms of affecting education... It forces people to reevaluate. It forces people to question their methods [and] try things differently,... but I think there are a whole bunch of different things that could... make people better teachers... . It did make me learn how to teach to those questions, [which]... did make me a better teacher. But, the question is were there other things that could have done that? Yeah. I am going to take an AP course this summer, [and] that will make me a better teacher. It is a heck of a lot cheaper than the MCAS test and takes a lot less time....[MCAS] has some benefits, but when you look at benefits, you have to look at the big picture and see how much do the benefits cost. Are they really important benefits?....There is money spent every year, and you’ve got the actual buying [of] the tests, creating the tests, [and paying scorers]. I would think it would that it has to cost a lot of money. The other thing is why focus all your time and money on something when maybe you could focus on something else that would yield greater benefits?....Maybe there is money better spent there on other things.

[I would tell the politicians and members of the BOE to] get rid of the high-stakes. Actually, get rid of the whole test,...[but] would the test work without the high stakes? Would schools take it seriously? Would kids take it seriously? Maybe not get rid of the whole test, just make it not high-stakes, and then you don’t certainly have to test every school system. I believe more in sampling than anything else and finding out information and seeing what you need to do. I don’t believe in a whole carrot and stick approach of the MCAS test....But, definitely get rid of the high stakes thing....because I think it is punitive, and I don’t really believe that it is going to make anybody improve in the long run.
APPENDIX E

REFLECTIONS ON MY EXPERIENCE IN CONDUCTING THIS STUDY

Someone once told me that conducting a dissertation study intensifies all of one's strengths and weaknesses. This statement was true of my experiences in conducting this study, for it forced all my personal fortes and failings to surface. For example, my solid organizational skills were clearly an asset as I prepared lists of contacts, catalogued my Participant Information and Informed Consent Forms, and carefully labeled, filed, and categorized my interview tapes and transcripts. My interpersonal skills paid off in my ability to speak about my study honestly and openly during my initial conversations with participants. My genuine fondness for people, curiosity, and need to get the whole story helped me generate fair and probing questions during the interview process; return repeatedly to my transcripts during analysis with an eye towards truth and fairness; and choose what I believe were the most appropriate words of my participants during the writing process.

On the other hand, my discomfort with conflict and empathy for my participants’ stories may have caused me to retreat from asking hard-hitting questions that would have allowed my participants to unveil deeper meanings to the stories they told. Furthermore, my impatience in wanting to “get it right” and fear of criticism often led me down the easy, safe path as I grappled with the interpretation and implications for my study. Fortunately, with the help of my advisor and critical friend, my fortitude allowed me to return to my findings as well as my participants’ words in order to cut to what I believe are the central, most salient issues and problems associated with this high-stakes testing requirement.
One of my greatest strengths is my ability to trust, and I drew on this strength throughout the process of this study. First, I trusted the design of my study and the method I had chosen to answer my research question. What I learned was that the three-interview process, guided by principles of phenomenology, worked to uncover the gripping complexities of my participants’ experiences with this high-stakes test. That is, the first interview allowed me to establish biographical context; the second interview allowed me to garner the details of my participants current lived experiences; and the third interview allowed me to get at the meaning my participants made of their experiences with the phenomenon of MCAS. I found the method successful. For example, one teacher had this to say about the interview process:

I was actually quite impressed with the larger frame in which [you] positioned the specific question of your topic. I think it created... a different range of reflection....I don’t know how your other informants responded to this, but.... if you just asked me about the MCAS experience, the instrument, the politics of MCAS [without delving into] my educational path, ...it would have been a less provocative, much more fragmented exploration of the issues.

Moreover, this method allowed me to establish myself as a professional, trustworthy researcher, who is genuinely interested in what my participants are saying. The third interview in particular also gave me the leeway to push my participants to reflect deeply and critically on how they made sense of this high-stakes testing requirement—one fraught with political controversy and conflicting opinions—and its impact on their practice, students, and professional lives.

At the end of each interview, I asked the participants what the interview experience was like for them. Inevitably, the participants responded that they had not realized the extent to which MCAS had affected them personally and professionally.
Moreover, they often said that the experience of being a participant heightened their understanding of the politics surrounding MCAS, the consequences attached to this high-stakes testing requirement, and the benefits and drawbacks some of them received from MCAS. For example, Anne states, “It is nice because the conversation alone gives me time to reflect... because we [teachers] just don’t have time to reflect.... It does make me think... about practice, and it makes me think about tests, [and] makes me think about kids.” I discovered that teachers were able to make connections among aspects of their work. Mike explained this as follows:

[Being interviewed] is kind of a good review.... I am thinking of all these things that I knew, but I hadn’t really put them together, and not just [ideas] about the MCAS test....[For instance,] I think it is a lot clearer as to what my philosophy of education is. So it was... bringing a lot of things together. I couldn’t answer a lot of these questions without basically figuring out what my assumptions are.

Most importantly, I learned by asking this final question about the interview process that teachers appreciated the opportunity to discuss their work, their impressions, and their concerns. As Tom stated,

How many people get the chance to be interviewed for four and a half hours about what they think about something? So in that way, it is a big treat, and it helps me. I haven’t come up with any new ideas about how I think about [MCAS],... but it is nice for me to be able to express it to someone who has some level [of understanding and cares] about what I think... It is good for me to think and try to articulate to somebody what I really think about [MCAS].

I also had to draw on my ability to trust my instincts in the process of analyzing my data. As I reduced, coded, categorized, wrote about, and made thematic connections with my data, I constantly questioned myself: Am I understanding the big picture of what my participants’ are saying about their experiences with MCAS? Have I paid enough attention to my participants’ biographical and school contexts in ways that
truthfully depict who they are? Are the connections I am making accurate? Ultimately, I had to trust that through the tapes and the transcripts I was hearing my participants’ voices clearly, and that the sense I was making of their words were true to their experiences and significance they placed on their experiences.

Finally, I had to trust myself in the process of writing my dissertation, particularly in crafting my findings and implications. After many hours of questioning myself about the fairness and accuracy of my findings and implications, I learned that my interpretations and implications were fair, well supported by the words of my participants, and informed by the literature I reviewed. Even now, I have to trust that my own words and interpretations do justice to my participants’ intended meanings, and makes sense to my readers.

The question I then have to ask myself is, what is my next step in regards to this research? First, I plan to craft some of my findings and discussions into publishable articles for practitioners, researchers, teacher educators, and policymakers. Second, I would like to extend this research beyond Massachusetts, as the phenomenon of high-stakes testing is not just occurring in this commonwealth. I would like to interview secondary English teachers from a variety of states where high-stakes testing is happening. These states could include Florida, Kentucky, Texas, and Arizona. My goal would be to find out how teachers from a variety of states experience testing of students. I would want to know how their tests and the policies surrounding the tests are different from or similar to the MCAS test, and in what ways teachers are affected by these tests. Once I gleam a more national picture of the impact of high-stakes testing on teachers, I would like to publish my results in book format.
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