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Media Coverage of Standardized Testing: A Qualitative Analysis of Newspaper Reports in Four North Carolina Newspapers

Denita Dowell-Reavis

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Media Coverage of Standardized Testing: A Qualitative Analysis of Newspaper Reports
in Four North Carolina Newspapers

By
Denita Dowell-Reavis

A Dissertation Submitted to the
Gardner-Webb University School of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University
2017

Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Denita Dowell-Reavis under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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No man is an island
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.

John Donne

The poet John Dunn wrote, “No Man is an Island”; and he was especially right about someone in the dissertation phase of their doctoral studies. I want to express gratitude to my co-workers: Dr. Alisha Cloer, Alison Whitaker, and Robbie Sipes for their moral support along the way. I particularly need to thank Erin Walle, a self-described “math girl” who read and coded the 69 trial articles for this study. My research assistant, Daniel Nicholson, proved faithful combing through hard copies of 416 articles to find those that dealt with the subject. Then, he tediously counted the words for the articles since they were not in an electronic version.

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Abstract

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Standardized testing exists as part of public policy to measure the success of students, teachers, and schools. Ushered in by No Child Left Behind during the G.W. Bush era, testing came with labels for schools which opened the conversation as to whether schools were in crisis or failing. Most of the focus in research on standardized tests has centered on whether the tests were biased, if they were overused, and how they affected teaching and learning. In a comprehensive review, no studies could be found to determine what the public knows about standardized tests based on newspaper reports.

This examination is an inductive, qualitative content analysis of articles from four North Carolina newspapers to determine the topics published about standardized testing. The researcher looked at topic, tone on education, tone on testing, word count, page, type of test, sources cited, and rhetorical devices used. The researcher used 300 articles systematically selected from a pool of 1,171 articles published in 1994, 2004, and 2014. The findings suggest most of the stories' topics dealt with accountability. Other regular topics include scores and testing; curriculum, scheduling, and grading; and funding. The findings also indicate the stories are published in the context of a negative tone towards education and towards testing.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

For years, the emphasis with researchers' studies on standardized tests has centered on whether such exams represent an accurate measure of learning, are used appropriately to inform instruction or are beholden to accountability efforts, are fair to all students or biased against students of color and those who live in poverty, and how testing affects teaching and learning (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Chapman, 2016; Ford & Helms, 2012; Johnson, 2005; Kohn, 2000a; Ravitch, 2011; Wiliam, 2010; Wilkins & Jones, 2009). Testing has been given the moniker of "high stakes testing" because results are used to promote or retain students or for funding or closing down schools (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Kohn, 2000a). High-stakes results affect schools, teachers, administrators, and students (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). Given the high stakes involved and the public's growing frustration with standardized testing regimes (Bradshaw, 2014; Chapman, 2016; Jacobson, 2002), it is interesting to note that few, if any, studies have sought to determine how much the public, including public school parents, really knows about standardized tests; yet as Harris (2015) explained in a study on parents' attitudes, "Wider engagement by teachers and researchers within mainstream news and social media platforms may help disseminate important information about assessment systems to parents, allowing them to be more active and informed" (p. 15).

Prior research shows parents and teachers rated their schools higher in high-performing schools than low-performing schools due, in part, to their feeling that the mission is more clearly defined in higher performing schools (Daniels, 2004, p. 119). Daniels (2004) found parents of children in high-performing schools perceive that tests were administered regularly and frequently to inform instruction and to help students

correct misunderstandings (p. 124). A Gallup study commissioned by the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) found parents (65%) were more likely than principals to believe that test scores help inform instruction (Chapman, 2016).

In the same NWEA study, six in 10 parents said their child's teacher never or rarely discusses test results with them either in person, on the phone, or through email (Chapman, 2016). One parent quoted in the NWEA study said she was not familiar with the strengths of the different types of assessments including formative, classroom tests and quizzes and summative, end-of-grade (EOG) tests (Chapman, 2016). Other than parents learning about their child's individual high-stakes test scores from the student's teacher, little information is examined in day-to-day discussions between teachers and parents (Chapman, 2016; O'Neil, 2012; Osburn, Stegman, Suitt, Laura, & Ritter, 2004; Paris, 1992; Stacy Campbell, Tammy Goodin, Jessie Nicholson, Jennifer Haire, personal communication, November 12, 2015). If teachers and schools are not providing this information, parents must rely on other, perhaps less well-informed sources, including their local daily newspapers. Some reviews say education coverage is "scant" (West, Whitehurst, & Dionne, 2009, p. 1). The apparent disconnect between the importance of standardized testing in public school accountability measures, the amount of information being shared with parents by teachers regarding testing, and the understanding of testing by public school parents led this researcher to consider for study the themes of what newspapers actually report about testing.

As Daniels (2004) found, the information parents and stakeholders have on testing influences their inclinations about public schools; but beyond parents' views, the information also affects public policy. As Fowler (2009) wrote, "Because the media must screen, select, and recontextualize information, they inevitably play a major role in

the policy process” (p. 156).

This researcher aims to build on the existing literature by conducting a qualitative media content analysis of print news coverage of standardized testing in North Carolina schools to determine the themes of news reports. A preliminary review shows news reports on test scores are presented positively or negatively (Stinneford, 1994c). Other news reports come within the debate about school funding, in justification for curriculum or schedule changes, in relation to testing scandals, in connection with making school district hires or moves, dealing with star college-bound athletes, or within other categories (Batten, 2004; Mooneyham, 1994a; Stinneford, 1994b; Varela, 1994a; Walker, 1994a; Weeks, 1994b, 1994c). The general public has access to information about testing through the news media, but what are the themes about testing the public is getting through written texts? For the purpose of this study, news media is considered to be four major newspapers in North Carolina.

Conceptual Framework

Before launching into the specifics of this study, one must understand the conceptual framework of the investigation. This writer is approaching the research from a descriptive exploratory standpoint, a good fit for qualitative research. A topic was examined and the researcher followed the direction. This differs widely from standard quantitative research which examines what effect variable x has on variable y . According to Creswell (2014), this type of qualitative research is known as constructivism. It is open-ended and inductive. Creswell wrote, “Social constructivists believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (p. 8). In this type of research,

Researchers recognize that their own backgrounds shape their interpretation, and

they position themselves in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their personal, cultural, and historical experiences. The researcher's intent is to make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world. (Creswell, 2014, p. 8)

Furthermore, this topic lends itself to a constructivist qualitative method.

Qualitative research “interprets phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001, p. 395). McMillan and Schumacher (2001) went on to say, “people’s perceptions are what they consider ‘real’ to them and what directs their actions, thoughts, and feelings” (p. 396). In the case of this particular study, information was gathered which then evolved into themes or patterns that connected the parts to a whole (Creswell, 2014, p. 66).

To further understand constructivism, one must turn to leading psychologists Jean Piaget and Lev Vgotsky (Santrock, 2003). Piaget’s work in educational research led him to two concepts: assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation “occurs when individuals incorporate new information into existing knowledge” (Santrock, 2003, p. 106). For accommodation, “individuals adjust to new information” (Santrock, 2003, p. 106). Santrock (2003) continued, saying one must change his/her schema, a framework that exists in an individual’s mind to organize information, with accommodation (p. 106). Vgotsky placed more emphasis on the social aspects of building knowledge than did Piaget. He believed students learned from their parents, peers, community, and others in addition to formal schooling (Santrock, 2003, p. 115). Both authors believed learners are best served by constructing meaning as they go versus a teacher-directed type of learning. Krippendorff (2012) echoed this idea of construction, saying, “the meanings of a text are always brought to it by someone” (p. 28). Piaget’s and Vgotsky’s theories match the

methodology this researcher is employing. The purpose is to discover what there is to be found rather than to begin with a theory and attempt to prove or disprove the hypothesis.

As a former local television news producer, reporter, and then teacher, instructional coach, assistant principal and now principal, this researcher already has existing knowledge about journalism, media, and schools. More of this researcher's personal connection will be explained in the methodology section. This study builds on the researcher's prior knowledge as well as the current academic literature to discern what, if any, new information is to be found in relation to what newspapers report on standardized test scores. As Krippendorff (2013) explained, "Text driven content analyses are also called 'fishing expeditions'" (p. 355). This researcher is hopeful to discover new information.

The researcher set out initially to compare how many stories were presented with positive words such as "test scores climb" versus how many were presented negatively using words such as "test scores remain stagnant" or "scores decline." As the researcher began reviewing 1994 articles from the *Fayetteville Observer*, there were 84 articles with the words test scores in them, but only 15 were actually about test scores. Many other reports were topics where test scores were mentioned tangentially. For example, some candidates used the words as they campaigned for school board positions (Nimocks, 1994). Realizing a sample to evaluate whether news reports were negative or positive might be small, the research topic was broadened to examine all categories of stories that include test scores whether they be political, sports-related, curriculum, or many other possible categories (Batten, 2004; Mooneyham, 1994a; Stinneford, 1994b; Varela, 1994a; Walker, 1994a; Weeks, 1994a). The researcher intends to discover the themes of print news coverage of standardized testing in North Carolina by examining stories printed in a

20-year span from four major North Carolina newspapers.

Chapter 2: Historical Context

To better understand where the current testing and accountability efforts rest, an examination of school reform through recent history must be examined. These reforms include the calls for vouchers, accountability, increasing standards, and desegregation. Particularly since the advent of the school choice movement and policymakers' demands for school accountability, more of the conversation about public schools from policymakers is negative. From national to state to even local politicians, the public hears that schools are "failing" (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Carr, 2010; Kohn, 2000a; Rothstein, 1998; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Vollmer, 2010). "The first stage of reform was to convince citizens that the present system of schooling was inefficient, anachronistic, and irrational" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 112). Much of this chatter followed the writings of Milton Friedman and his introduction of the idea of school choice.

School Choice

The origin of the school choice debate can largely trace back to Nobel Prize winner economist Milton Friedman who suggested in his 1962 book *Capitalism and Freedom* that school choice would abolish the monopoly of public schools. Friedman (1962) believed education spending, money collected by the government, should allow parents a larger voice in where the money is placed.

Governments could require a minimum level of schooling financed by giving parents vouchers redeemable for a specified maximum sum per child per year if spent on "approved" educational services. Parents would then be free to spend this sum and any additional sum they themselves provided on purchasing educational services from an 'approved' institution of their own choice.

(Friedman, 1962, p. 89)

Friedman (1962) believed the market economy would improve public schools through competition and said competition would produce a “healthy variety of school” (p. 93).

Advocates for charter schools and private school vouchers believe, like the economist Friedman (1962), that more competition is healthy in the marketplace. Tyack and Cuban (1995) elaborated on Friedman’s philosophy:

Others, believing that public education is mostly beyond repair, have argued that the way to regenerate schooling is to create a market system of education in which parents can choose their children’s schools, either public or private, and pay the tuition through vouchers funded by taxes. (p. 14)

With Friedman opening the conversation about charters and private school vouchers, it is important to take a look at the public’s view on both. According to Phi Delta Kappa Gallup Poll (2014) results, given a definition of charter schools, 70% of Americans favor charters. However, when no definition of charters is given, 63% favor them (PDK/Gallup Poll, 2014). These findings indicate that perhaps more information about charter schools provides the public with a more comfortable impression. Included in this same research, findings that show 63% of those surveyed oppose vouchers for private schools.

The movement toward vouchers and more charters forces public educators to keep their eye on policy development. Based on results from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation (2015) poll conducted in April 2015, 75% of voters in North Carolina surveyed felt that public tax dollars should not be used for exclusive private schools. In North Carolina, High Point University poll results released in September 2015 show 63% of those polled oppose vouchers for religious schools of any kind (Clark, 2015). Despite

national and state opposition to vouchers, North Carolina's General Assembly passed a law in the 2013 summer session allowing vouchers for private schools. The North Carolina Association of Educators and the North Carolina Justice Center, on behalf of 25 plaintiffs, challenged the law. An earlier ruling from Judge Robert H. Hobgood ruled that North Carolina's voucher program violated the state's constitution. "The General Assembly fails the children of North Carolina when they are sent with public taxpayer money to private schools that have no legal obligation to teach them anything," Hobgood said (Blythe & Stancill, 2014, para. 6). The North Carolina Court of Appeals allowed the vouchers to be dispersed while the case made it through the courts. In October 2014, the North Carolina Supreme Court bypassed the Court of Appeals to take the case (North Carolina Justice Center, n.d.).

Despite the legal challenge, the North Carolina Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of vouchers during the 2015 summer session (Prothero, 2015). Shortly after the state's Supreme Court decision, the president of the Center for Education Reform, a pro-voucher group said,

This court ruling is a major win for parents and students in North Carolina and across the nation, affirming that parents should ultimately have power over decisions about how their children are educated, regardless of their race or zip code. (Center for Education Reform, 2015, para. 2)

The debate over private school vouchers and expansion of charter schools continues in North Carolina. For the legislative priorities in 2016, an organization of district administrators called on lawmakers to require "state-funded private and charter schools to provide transportation, nutritious meals and exceptional children's services, and preventing these schools from setting academic entrance requirements that preclude

attendance by some student populations” (North Carolina Association of School Administrators [NCASA], 2016, p. 1). The group is also asking that the growth of school choice options have limited “financial impact on services available to students enrolled in public school districts” (NCASA, 2016, p. 1).

Desegregation

Friedman’s (1962) writing on school choice appeared in 1962, just years after litigation that became known as *Brown vs. Board of Education*. The Brown ruling from the United States Supreme Court said separate schools for Blacks and Whites were unconstitutional (Patterson, 2001). A case that became known as Brown II in 1955 said that separate schools should be dismantled with “all deliberate speed” (Patterson, 2001). As bus boycotts and sit-ins toiled on towards change, change in schools became likely due to the court’s rulings but not a priority in society. Patterson (2001) wrote that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 signed into law helped equalize opportunities dealing with public accommodations and employment but said Black families were not demanding immediate change in schools. Parents who chose to send their children to mostly White schools endured, believing their “children were getting a better education than they could have received in the local black schools” (Patterson, 2001, p. 126). Patterson wrote liberal laws supporting school change and a boom in economic growth in the 60s allowed “real spending per pupil in public schools” to increase considerably (p. 127). As schools edged towards being more inclusive, a potential halt was in sight with a new Supreme Court.

In the 1970s, President Richard Nixon had an opportunity to name four Supreme Court justices. What became known as the “Burger Court” named for Warren Burger, was feared to be a court that opposed civil rights (Patterson, 2001). Engaged in the

Vietnam War, public opinion polls said most Whites favored desegregation and most people no longer regarded civil rights as a high priority (Patterson, 2001). Patterson (2001) reported Burger's court did not want a "rapid reversal" of what had been decided in the 2 decades prior (p. 152). In fact, The Burger court decided the phrase "'all deliberate speed' was no longer constitutionally permissible" (Patterson, 2001, p. 154). The court ruled dual systems (one for Blacks and one for Whites) were to be terminated and systems should operate "only unitary schools" (Patterson, 2001, p. 154). The tumult over desegregation in the early 1970s continued with Blacks protesting the closing of their schools and Klansmen and protesters engaging in gunfights (Patterson, 2001).

Despite the social turmoil, Former U.S. Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch (1990) said the 1970s were more about a "laid-back" approach to education (p. 1). Ravitch argued that "widely publicized studies suggested that, compared with family background, schools had relatively little influence on students' life chances" (p. 1). She said that the Coleman report, the idea that schools do not matter, led to the "deconstruction of the curriculum and lowering of standards" (Ravitch, 1990, p. 1). As a result, Ravitch reported Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores dropped in the 1970s compared to the mid-1960s, and the public became "apathetic" about education (p. 2). Not only did education drop from the lead, but the public became more concerned about the economy (Watson, 2007).

From the mid-1970s to 1980s, the debate surrounded busing students from predominantly Black or White neighborhoods to achieve racial balance in schools. In Charlotte, North Carolina, pupils were reassigned in spite of the controversy (Patterson, 2001). Patterson (2001) reported most parents were proud of busing efforts and the results. "Standardized test scores increased in 1975 for children of both races and

especially for blacks. The black-white gap in scores narrowed a bit until the mid-80s” (Patterson 2001, pp. 158-159). In 1984, President Ronald Reagan came to Charlotte to declare busing as the “social experiment nobody wants” (Patterson, 2001, p. 159).

In the midst of Reagan’s opposition to busing, a national discussion on education came to the fore. Reagan, who served as president between 1981 and 1989, “denounced court-ordered busing, sought to abolish the Department of Education (which had been established in the Carter years), and favored tax credits and vouchers to help people opt out of the public schools” (Patterson, 2001, p. 171). Reagan commissioned a nationally released report critics say set out to dismantle public education (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Rothstein, 1998; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The report was titled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Reform*.

A Nation at Risk

A Nation at Risk in 1983 placed a sharp focus on student achievement and amplified the calls about “failing schools” (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Rothstein, 1998; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Since the federally funded report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, community support of public education has “dwindled” (Loveless, 1997, p. 132). The federal report, based primarily on SAT scores, showed students in America far behind other economically developed countries in math and science scores. Probably the most often repeated phrase from the report said education was not a matter of simple schooling but of national pride. “Educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and as a people” (National Commission on Excellence in Education [NCEE], 1983, p. 13). A national investigation of the 14-year decline in scores found the drop was partly because more students were then taking the

test (Wirtz, 1977).

Based on the Nation at Risk report, the assumption was that America could not compete in a global marketplace unless education in the U.S. improved. Berliner and Biddle (1995) blamed the media for reporting the study without questioning the specifics (p. 52). “And the ideal of academic excellence as the primary goal of schooling seems to be fading across the board in American education” (NCEE, 1983, p. 22). The Nation at Risk report criticized graduation requirements in all the states and said curriculum had been homogenized. A Nation at Risk also said other countries demanded more mathematics and science courses from their high school aged students than the U.S. The study said American students spent fewer hours in class and fewer hours on homework than those in other industrialized nations. Writers said teachers were drawn from the lowest performing high school and college graduates and that there were not enough qualified science and math teachers. The panel recommended that colleges demanded more rigorous performance and standards for education students. Finally, the report said more standardized testing should be in place nationwide (NCEE, 1983, pp. 35-36).

Alfie Kohn, a critic of standardized tests, said the Nation at Risk report, “was part of a concerted campaign—based on exaggerated and often downright misleading evidence—to stir up widespread concerns about our schools and, consequently, demands for more testing” (Kohn, 2000b, p. 2). Rothstein (1998) contributed to Kohn’s conclusion by relating the Sandia National Laboratories report that followed A Nation at Risk. He said Sandia researchers examined scores to find “average scores of top performers are generally increasing. . . . Evidence of decline used to justify system-wide reform is based on misinterpretations or misrepresentations of the data” (Sandia National Laboratories, as cited in Rothstein, 1998, p. 63). The Sandia examination, commissioned

by the Department of Energy using seasoned researchers, was never released to the public (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Rothstein, 1998). Berliner and Biddle (1995) augmented the toll that *A Nation at Risk* took on the national consciousness of education. Their book, *The Manufactured Crisis*, rebuffed the idea that American education is in a tailspin. Using data on worker productivity, Intelligence Quotient (IQ) scores, National Association for Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, public opinion on schools and more, the duo said those who believe there is an educational crisis are victims of a “massive ‘con game’” (Berliner & Biddle, 1995, p. 9). The Nation’s Report Card released by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2013) supported Berliner and Biddle’s claim that scores have gone up in reading and mathematics. Since students started taking tests from NAEP in 1971 and 1973, scores for 9- and 13-year olds made gains ranging from eight to 25 points (NCES, 2013). Bracey (2000) affirmed the rise in NAEP scores since 1977 when long-term data were first collected. The NAEP study also found that the gap in reading scores between Black students and White students was nearly half what it was in 2012 compared to 1971. Similar gains were not shown for 17-year olds taking the tests. The older students had scores that were not statistically different in 1971 and 2012 (NCES, 2013). Farhi (2012) reported that testing on Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) scores show elementary and middle school students outscore the international average and are close to the global leaders. He noted those scores are not reported in the news (Farhi, 2012). Despite whether scores were up or down, Rothstein, Kohn (2000a), Farhi (2012), and Berliner and Biddle would agree, criticism from *A Nation at Risk* led to the attack on public schools and intensified conversations about failing schools. Farhi said the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) institutionalized the phrase “failing schools.”

NCLB

The premise that America's education was in crisis gained ground in the early 2000s. The "crisis thinking" led to federal legislation called NCLB, which discussed the "soft bigotry of low expectations." The 2002 signing of NCLB by President George W. Bush led to the direct connections between politics and education.

By the end of the 1990s, results from national and international assessments suggested that student achievement had not improved rapidly enough to ensure that all students would be proficient in the core subjects of reading and mathematics, nor were American students, as a group, competitive with their peers from other countries. (Benway, Jordan, & Rosell, 2008, pp. 6-7)

Some educators and researchers would argue the mantra of "failing schools" clouds what they say is the truth.

The "nation's failing public schools" catchphrase has been repeated so often and given so much prominence by politicians, the press, and other thought leaders that the fact that public schools have made dramatic improvements during the past 20 years largely has been ignored. (Carr, 2010, p. 26)

As will be discussed later in this study, some research concludes the media perpetuates the label of failing schools through coverage on education. The language "failing schools" comes directly from NCLB.

NCLB was an iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, originally passed in 1965 to allow spending support for public schools for children kindergarten age through Grade 12. The emphasis of NCLB was to lift up the disadvantaged by offering them an equal opportunity to a high-quality education. The legislation also expected all students to be 100% proficient by the 2013-2014 school year

(Klein, 2015). Schools that did not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) for 2 years or more were expected to undergo federally mandated interventions to improve performance (Diallo, 2011).

In particular, the legislation focused on holding schools accountable for the academic achievement of all students. Much criticism of the law hinged on the accountability piece. Academic achievement is measured through standardized test scores. For those schools that did not meet the mark, they were to be labeled as turnaround schools and their students were to be provided alternatives to receive a “high-quality education” (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). “NCLB is what set the testing frenzy of the United States in motion” (Reddell, 2010, p. 6). The law included language about rewards (bonuses and recognitions) for schools that met the mark (Kohn, 2000a); however, the language included sanctions for schools that did not meet standards. The law expected AYP, as defined by the states, from all groups including economically disadvantaged, racial and ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency. The law established that those tested would include Grades 3-12 annually (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Kohn (2000a) described NCLB as a carrot-and-stick approach. Schools, teachers, and students who made expected proficiency were rewarded (carrot); those who did not got the stick or punishment (Kohn, 2000a, p. 319).

Shortly after NCLB’s passage, Fritzberg (2004) reported “that North Carolina estimates that a full 60% of their schools will fail to meet NCLB standards” (p. 21). A 2011 Center for Education Progress (CEP) report said 48% of schools nationwide failed to make AYP (Diallo, 2011). AYP is determined by standards set by the states but under federal guidance. Proficiency rates were to be 100% by 2014 according to NCLB. The

Chief Executive Officer of the CEP said the fact that nearly half of the public schools failed in 2011 to make AYP shows how crudely NCLB measures the quality of a school (Diallo, 2011). The CEP report's author said schools that fail to make AYP should not be automatically judged to have weak educational systems but said they may have harder tests or higher proficiency targets (Diallo, 2011).

Added to the controversy of making or not making AYP, Fritzberg (2004) reported based on other research:

Assuming a conservative rise in nationwide costs associated with NCLB of 20%, we are looking at an \$84.5 billion increase to truly assist the plethora of failing schools; assuming a 35% increase in costs, the additional amount required is \$148 billion. (p. 21)

The estimated costs led critics to call NCLB an “unfunded mandate” from the federal government (Ravitch, 2010, p. 98).

ABCs Accountability Program

Before NCLB, North Carolina's State Board of Education developed a system of accountability known as the ABCs of Public Education. This was in response to a 1996 act known as School Based Management and Accountability Program (SB 1139) of the General Assembly. ABCs represents Accountability, teaching the Basics, with an “emphasis on high educational standards, and maximum local Control” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2012a, p. 3).

The law outlines a framework for rewards and supports at the school level, as well, going so far as to define “low-performing schools” as those where state expectations of performance or growth are not made and where more than half of the students are not performing at grade level. (Johnson, 2005, p. 64)

The ABCs plan placed the accountability at the school level (Johnson, 2005, p. 71). According to Johnson (2005), reviews of the tests in North Carolina found them of high quality but questioned the tests' alignment to state standards. The reviews also showed North Carolina did a good job with help required for struggling students, "but they could not uncover the state budget items officials said were connected to this intervention" (Johnson, 2005, pp. 73-74). Most significantly perhaps, Johnson found teachers were "likely to elevate the level and depth of their instruction and attention to individual needs, in response to pressure from state policy to meet standards with all students" (p. 4). Based on these findings from Johnson, regardless of teachers' understandings of state mandates towards testing, the teachers improved their practice knowing there were accountability measures in place.

Initially, the ABCs from the State Board of Education "established gateways for student promotion at grades 3, 5, and 8 and was intended to ensure that students who needed academic assistance would be identified and provided assistance before the principal made student promotion decisions" (Fabrizio, 2006, p. 4). The ABCs Accountability Program measured student progress and the school's progress (Hunt, 2001, p. 52). NCLB complicated the ABCs. Fabrizio (2006) said a school could receive North Carolina recognition under the ABCs but be placed in "school improvement" status under NCLB due to inadequate performance (p. 7). This is due, in part, to NCLB's requirement that scores be reported based on subgroups. Scores are to be disaggregated among "ethnic and racial groups as well as students with limited English proficiency, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students" (Fabrizio, 2006, p. 5).

Then, in 2002-2003, North Carolina changed the ABC program to better fit the

expectations of NCLB. One advantage North Carolina had over other states is there was already a statewide testing program in place. Schools were awarded status known as “Schools Making High Growth,” “Schools Making Expected Growth,” “Honors School of Excellence,” “School of Excellence,” “School of Distinction,” “School of Progress,” “Schools receiving No Recognition,” “Priority Schools,” and “Low-Performing Schools” based on the percentage of students who showed proficiency on EOG and/or end-of-course (EOC) test scores (NCDPI, 2012a). The ABCs model was based on growth not proficiency. Fabrizio (2006) reported test scores were up for the last several years before NCLB saying it was unclear if the rise in scores was due to NCLB. Fabrizio went on to say there was an actual “increase in data-driven decision making” (p. 30). The increase in North Carolina scores predates NCLB, according to Vaughn (2002), who said student proficiency rose 11% between 1993 and 1999 for Grades 3-8 in reading and math (p. 207). A report from the Wake County Public School System (2001), one of the biggest systems in North Carolina, showed performance for all students in the state increased between 1994 and 2000 by 14.3% for both math and reading (p. 7). In 1996, Secretary of Education Richard Riley praised North Carolina, Michigan, and Texas results saying those states’ eighth-grade mathematics scores were most improved (Hambleton & Meara, 2000, p. 137). For the year 2000, Former North Carolina Governor Jim Hunt (2001) reported, 70% of “schools achieved expected or exemplary growth” (p. 52). Other studies show, “On international measures, U.S. students made significant gains in math and science between 1995 and 2007 both in the fourth and eighth grades, while achievement gaps have narrowed” (Carr, 2010, p. 24). These reports, taken as a whole, would show more North Carolina students were performing at or above grade level in math and reading scores before NCLB was implemented and in the early years afterward.

Fabrizio (2006) interviewed policy and business leaders to investigate the impact of NCLB on the ABCs Accountability Program. Most of the interviewees admitted political factors led to the ABCs' creation. Fabrizio also reported a problem before the ABCs was the "ever-changing education initiatives by the legislature, the Governor, the State Board of Education or the State Superintendent of Public Instruction" (p. 50). Some respondents in his study said the ABCs were thought to be the "flavor of the year," meaning just one more change for which educators had to adjust (Fabrizio, 2006, p. 107).

One of the biggest adjustments from the ABCs to NCLB was the move from a look at how student performance improved from year to year to how many "passed" the standardized tests. Fabrizio (2006) called NCLB "'an all or nothing model' where missing one target will cause an entire school to miss AYP" (p. 83). Fabrizio described NCLB as a measure to focus on test scores alone to measure a school's progress. Fabrizio related some of the problems with NCLB are that there was no pilot year and that all students in Grades 3-8 being proficient by 2013-2014 was not feasible. The law allowed parents to pick a school if their home school did not meet performance standards. Districts were required to provide transportation to those who wanted to go to higher performing schools, part of what critics called the "unfunded mandate" (Ravitch, 2010, p. 98).

Some of the concrete changes from ABCs to NCLB include fourth- and seventh-grade students were no longer tested in writing. Also, the rates of test participation for Grades 3-8 were changed from 98% under the ABCs to 95% under NCLB. Another change removed incentives for staff members at schools that achieved exemplary growth. Teachers received \$1,000 and teaching assistants \$500 (NCDPI, 2012b). In Fabrizio's (2006) study, the interviewees "consistently commented that North Carolina's system

seems more ‘fair’ than NCLB” (p. 109). Fair or not, the emphasis on testing has been the law for the country since 2002, and NCLB was overdue for renewal 5 years after its passage.

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Congress was supposed to reauthorize NCLB in 2007. After years of no changes, federal lawmakers scrapped NCLB in December 2015 with ESSA (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The act is similar to NCLB, and yet proponents promise the revision gives more control back to the states. ESSA still requires annual testing for students, requires standards are taught to prepare students for college and career, and aims to increase access to quality preschool programs. The new law “maintains an expectation” that low-performing schools, based on test scores and graduation rates, will be held accountable and will be expected to act to change course (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Recent Change in North Carolina

Not only have there been education reforms nationwide, but in North Carolina there have been many. Examining public perception of schools has become even more necessary since massive legislative education reforms in 2013. Further, a new way of ranking schools adopted in statute in September 2015 placed nearly one fourth of North Carolina schools in the category of low performing based on test scores (Hui, 2015).

Views of the new education law were the subject of recent research. In the early part of 2014, two Wilmington researchers sent a survey link to multiple PTA organizations across North Carolina. Smith and Imig’s (2014) survey was posted on multiple websites, including personal Facebook and Twitter pages and the *Charlotte Observer* Facebook page. In addition, individual respondents also forwarded and/or

posted the survey link. One should say the majority of the respondents, based on self-reporting, had some association as a school employee at one time or another. Of the 2,700 responses, only 842 identified themselves as having no prior work experience with schools. Still, their responses followed the trends of the overall answers.

Smith and Imig (2014) described in a survey of nearly 2,700 North Carolinians the image of North Carolina education has become “tarnished.” Smith and Imig’s study opened describing North Carolina as a former national model for public education. “Unfortunately, nearly a decade of funding declines and a host of major policy changes passed by the NC Legislature in the summer of 2013 are raising concerns about North Carolina’s education system” (Smith & Imig, 2014, p. 2). Their findings mirrored national reports saying respondents would rate their own child’s school with a grade of “A” or “B.” However,

there is significant disapproval of nearly every financial and legislative decision signed by the governor in 2013. In fact, less than 1% of participants indicate that they hold a great deal of trust in the state’s legislature or governor to make decisions related to public schools. Further, nearly one in three respondents indicate that recent legislative changes have made them consider pulling their children from their traditional public school in favor of a private or public charter school. The concerns voiced by this study’s 2,300+ respondents are grave and consistent. (Smith & Imig, 2014, p. 2)

Smith and Imig (2014) asked about teacher tenure, teacher evaluations, Read to Achieve (a North Carolina law requiring all third graders to be proficient in reading by the end of the grade), and the respondents’ confidence in governing bodies. Strikingly, 96.7% of respondents said they had little or no trust in the legislature or the governor

when it came to matters of schooling. Smith and Imig's report highlighted comments from those surveyed including remarks such as "Most of our current legislature do not know enough about education to make the changes they have enacted" (p. 19). Similarly, one respondent said, "It would be nice if we could put trust back into the teachers that they know what is right and appropriate for young children" (Smith & Imig, 2014, p. 18).

On the specific matter of testing, a frustration with over-testing appeared in Smith and Imig's (2014) report. The survey did not ask specific questions about the type and quality of education schools deliver, but it did give an opportunity for additional comments. One theme Smith and Imig found in the comments was an overabundance of tests.

The amount of standardized testing my daughter did in elementary school was ridiculous. They probably lost a month of instruction time as they reviewed and sat for tests. At many schools, the last weeks of school were severely under utilized because everything had been crammed in preparation of the test and the last few weeks were just for review or maybe preview for the next grade. (Smith & Imig, 2014, p. 22)

Another person in the survey simply said, "The amount of testing is out of control" (Smith & Imig, 2014, p. 22).

Echoing the complaints about testing, in 2014, a research firm that conducted studies for President Barack Obama's 2012 campaign found the public disenchanted with standardized testing. Fifty-seven percent in the Harstad survey said there was too much testing (Democrats for Public Education, 2014, p. 5). One of the biggest critiques of testing was that it takes nearly 30% of the school year to prepare for and administer the tests. A survey by the Carnegie Foundation found 13,500 teachers felt statewide testing

programs give them little information about how to better serve students (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 79). Despite criticisms of testing, former Governor Jim Hunt said, “the real danger comes if we *don’t* do the testing. Without tests, we have no way of knowing which students and which schools are succeeding—and which need additional help” (Hunt, 2001, p. 55). While testing remains critical to public perception and public policy on schools, questions continue about whether testing is the one measure of success at schools.

Policy Context

Smith and Imig’s (2014) Wilmington survey was conducted after a massive amount of legislation made it through the General Assembly in 2013. One part of the law took away caps on the number of students in any fourth- through twelfth-grade classes. Another portion, Read to Achieve, mandated that all third graders be proficient in reading by the end of the school year or not be promoted to fourth grade. Still another, took away extra money teachers receive for earning a master’s degree (Excellent Public Schools Act, 2013). An additional part of the law eliminated teacher tenure putting all teachers on a 1-, 2-, or 4-year contract. Lawmakers also increased funding for the academic year but not at a rate to offset the number of students who came into the schools (Excellent Public Schools Act, 2013). As a result, North Carolina has one of the lowest per pupil funding formulas in the country (Frohlich, 2014). Additionally, lawmakers required districts to identify the top teachers to award a \$500 bonus. Furthermore, the General Assembly also allowed \$4,200 dollars to be given to families for private school tuition. These awards were called “Opportunity Scholarships” and were to be given to low-income students (Excellent Public Schools Act, 2013). At charter schools, lawmakers reduced the number of teachers required to hold a North Carolina teaching license from

75% to 50%. Lastly, the state set up a grading system for public schools with 80% being based on proficiency rates for students based on standardized tests and 20% based on growth of those students. All these reforms were enveloped in North Carolina Senate bill 795, legislation called Excellent Public Schools Act (2013).

State senate president pro tempore, the highest ranking senate position, Phil Berger led the charge to pass legislation regarding social promotion, student and school accountability, teacher quality, and school choice. In a brochure to promote the act published in 2012, a year before the legislation went through, Berger cited reports from American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC, n.d.), the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), a 2010 Fordham report, and a report in Education Week (Cavanaugh, 2012) to bolster his call for change.

Each of those groups, ALEC, NCTQ, and Fordham has a hand in shaping public policy particularly when it comes to schools and education. ALEC describes itself as a nonpartisan group but is known to be a conservative organization with former Republican presidential candidates Scott Walker, Ted Cruz, and Mike Huckabee as guest speakers in San Diego during July 2015. According to Forbes magazine, each of the three, Walker, Cruz, and Huckabee, were in favor of more homeschooling and school choice such as charters and vouchers for private schools (Sullivan 2015b, 2015c, 2015d). Walker also broke up teacher unions as governor in Wisconsin and expanded private school vouchers (Sullivan, 2015c). In December 2015, ALEC had Dr. Ben Carson, a former Republican candidate for president, as the guest speaker at the Arizona winter meeting. Based on Forbes, Carson was against the Common Core, a set of curriculum standards adopted in 42 states, and Carson favored school choice (Sullivan, 2015a).

The Fordham Institute founded NCTQ in 2000. The institute's webpage starts

with “Too many American children receive an inferior education because too many U.S. schools and school systems are dysfunctional or ineffective” (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2011, “The Problem,” para. 1). It seems that most sources Berger used to support his plans are traditionally conservative groups and often disapproving of traditional public schools.

Berger is not the only North Carolina lawmaker critical of public schools. When Winston-Salem/Forsyth county school leaders were asked to defend a plan to lessen the stigma on state issued school grades, they were met with judgmental remarks from a sitting Mecklenburg senator (Fitzsimon, 2015). State Senator Bob Rucho criticized the school leaders about their efforts on the grading, saying, “What it was always designed to be is to show that the (public school) system has failed and we’re out fixing it” (Fitzsimon, 2015, p. 1).

Two new elements to reporting standardized test scores in North Carolina came into play for the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years. First, students were awarded scores based on a five-point scale versus a four-point scale. In the past, scores of one or two on an EOG or EOC were deemed nonproficient, while a score of three or four was proficient. For scores reported for the 2013-2014 year, scores of one and two were still nonproficient. A score of a three meant the student was proficient on grade-level material but not considered College and Career Ready as denoted through a switch to the Common Core standards. Those students who scored a four or five were considered both grade-level proficient and College and Career Ready. Secondly, the state released data on schools with 80% based on proficiency numbers and 20% based on growth (Excellent Public Schools Act, 2013). The public reporting requirement pushed by Senators Berger, Rucho, and others has met criticism from school system leaders and policy watch groups.

It is hard to be any clearer than that. Rucho likes the A-F grading system because he thinks it shows that public schools have failed. But what it actually shows is where low-income kids go to school. School grades are determined by a formula with test scores counting for 80 percent and growth in scores for only 20 percent. (Fitzsimon, 2015, p. 1)

The schools' scores were posted before the Excellent Public Schools Act of 2013 on the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's website. However, the new publication rule required the scores to be published on district websites. There are no standardized test score requirements or reporting for private schools. A former employee with the organization that governs private schools in North Carolina added, "Test performance data reported to the Authority under this subdivision is not a public record under Chapter 132 of the General Statutes" (personal communication, William Cox, Senior Associate Director, State Education Assistance Authority, September 30, 2015). Not only are private school scores not required to be published, they are not public record.

Meantime, in this researcher's experience, a public school that exceeded expected growth for 2 straight years was still categorized as a "D," according to the state report card due to the low number of students who made proficiency (NCDPI, n.d.a). Both these changes, the new scale and the publication of scores, led to even more discussions of test scores and analysis on what they mean for schools, teachers, administrators, and students.

Despite some policymakers' criticisms of schools, multiple polls show the public believes in the job their local schools are doing and supports teachers (Bradshaw, 2014; Democrats for Public Education, 2014; Fernandez, 2016; PDK/Gallup Poll, 2014; Smith

& Imig, 2014). Other public opinion polls have gauged the public's interest in schools. Fifty-five percent of voters say education should be a top national priority (Puriefey, 2003). Historically, there has been little research into the public attitudes on schools based on what community members see and read in the media.

Even with poll findings that the public supports teachers and schools, other polls by the Gallup organization found public confidence in education has dropped since 1973 (Loveless, 1997, p. 131). Rothstein (1998) connected a drop in confidence with what he calls myths. Rothstein examined the myths perpetuated about public education that schools are failing. He debunked the idea of failure using data from SAT and NAEP scores. He concluded that actual test scores are not falling, saying,

Because popular indictment of school performance has been so devastating, many have concluded that the public education system is hopeless, leading to demands for privatization of education, whether with vouchers, contracting out to for-profit educators, or the quasi-privatization of charter schools. (Rothstein, 1998, p. 6)

One of the biggest critics of standardized testing, Alfie Kohn (2000b), agreed the position that public schools are failing is used to bolster the need for more choice options. He said standardized tests have become a barometer for spending priorities.

Exams used to be administered mostly to decide where to place kids or what kind of help they needed; only recently have scores been published in the newspaper and used as the primary criteria for judging children, teachers, and schools—indeed, as the basis for flunking students or denying them a diploma, deciding where money should be spent, and so on. Tests have lately become a mechanism by which public officials can impose their will on schools, and they are doing so with a vengeance. (Kohn, 2000b, p. 1)

Rothstein (1998), Kohn (2000b), and Berliner and Biddle (1995) would argue public school critics use shaky evidence when comparing American schools to international ones. They blame faulty evidence on the press (Berliner & Biddle, 1995, p. 54). They claim looking at other countries' scores (for example, Japan) ignores America's view of developing the whole child, student creativity, social responsibility, and after-school experiences such as part-time work, sports, and dance (Berliner & Biddle, 1995, pp. 52-54).

With few questions as to how leading North Carolina policymakers feel about public education, this researcher is left trying to determine if the media is to blame. Certainly, some writers would fault the media for the public's view. "They have so often been besieged by negative and distorted media reports about our educational system" (Berliner & Biddle, 1995, p. 10). Berliner and Biddle (1995) further argued that testing data suggest American students are doing fine but "somehow the press seems not to notice" (p. 59).

Need for the Study

Since there is no comprehensive study that seems to exist about North Carolina news reports on test scores, practical and theoretical considerations would appear to point to a need for a study of this subject. This researcher builds on existing literature through an exploration of the themes of reports on test scores from four major North Carolina papers during a span of 20 years. According to the landmark study from McCombs and Shaw (1972), mass media is the agenda setter for important political issues turning those issues from the media to the public's attention (p. 177). Links have been made between the public's perspective on crime and the media's portrayal of crime showing some newspapers' portrayal of crime was disproportionate to actual crimes committed

(Winfrey & Graber as portrayed in Ghanem, 1996, p. 8). This study on test scores reporting in the media was framed around a central question: What themes and patterns dealing with standardized assessments are indicated in printed texts?

With this information, school systems can better determine how to help shape public perception of education. In the age where public school educators are told to market their schools to avoid losing students to charter, private, and home schools, public perception is critical. Testing critic Alfie Kohn (2000b) said the discussion on test scores is to show schools in a bad light:

Other people, meanwhile, are determined to cast public schools in the worst possible light as a way of paving the way for the privatization of education. After all, if your goal was to serve up our schools to the marketplace, where the point of reference is what maximizes profit rather than what benefits children, it would be perfectly logical for you to administer a test that many students would fail in order to create the impression that public schools were worthless. (p. 2)

News outlets should also be able to use this study on newspaper reporting to customize reports to what readers want to see and know. As Qian (2012) found in a study on media messaging, “Repetition and intensity of the news messages and the issue specific information are probably important factors that may influence the process of acquiring information, forming or changing opinions” (p. 124).

The content analysis on newspaper reports about test scores can dig beneath public polling. A March 2016 High Point University poll found that 35% of North Carolinians surveyed said education is one of the biggest problems in the state. Those numbers compare to 15% in the same survey who said education is the biggest problem facing the country (High Point University, 2016). Another poll conducted by

SurveyUSA in March 2016 reported that 53% of North Carolinians disapprove of the job the state legislature is doing (Survey USA Election Poll, 2016). As described earlier, the legislature in the past 3 years has passed a package of laws deemed to be unfavorable to public education (Fitzsimon, 2015). In the same Survey USA Election Poll (2016), 66% of all those surveyed said North Carolina schools receive inadequate funding.

Furthermore, an April poll from Elon University found more than 68% of North Carolinians surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed with paying more taxes to fund public schools (Fernandez, 2016). Those surveyed also overwhelmingly said the state was “on the wrong track” (58.4%), and more than 89% said the state pays teachers too little (Fernandez, 2016). Lastly, given a choice of approve or disapprove, 48.7% said they were unhappy with the way the North Carolina legislature is doing its job (Fernandez, 2016).

Perhaps the most important purpose of this study is to illuminate what is being reported on testing because so much public policy is tied to testing and results. According to Carr (2015), “greater access to the news media also results in more elite leaders having greater influence over the topics and issues that comprise the public agenda” (p. 47). If the policymakers have a loud voice through media outlets, they can drive new bills through to passage. As Fowler (2009) would argue, newspaper coverage is often inadequate, allowing interest groups to push legislation (p. 161).

Another reason for the study is because public policy influences spending. According to 2012 research on assessment spending, “The 45 jurisdictions in our data account for about \$669 million in average yearly spending, or \$27 per pupil in grades 3-9” (Chingos, 2012, p. 10). Chingos’s (2012) report went on to say including the districts for which he could not find data and that his number only includes primary assessments.

Chingos put the real estimate at \$1.7 billion annually for assessment spending nationwide. Even though North Carolina is at one of the lowest amounts of test spending per pupil (\$11), nearly \$9 million went into North Carolina testing in 2012 (Chingos, 2012, p. 29). The assessment spending study from Chingos was conducted before North Carolina put into place the Excellence in Education Act, which mandates reading testing for third graders for promotion. The third-grade requirement passed in 2013 could add significantly to testing costs in North Carolina.

Public policy on testing affects spending, but one cannot ignore the idea of testing for profit. Most testing companies have “benefitted dramatically from privatization” (Moses & Nanna, 2007, p. 60). Furthermore, as in North Carolina, Moses and Nanna (2007) argued the testing industry can see an increase in revenue, which allows “increases in marketing and lobbying power” (p. 61). Moses and Nanna argued, “the testing tail is now wagging the educational dog” (p. 61), meaning public policy on educational testing is beholden to industry instead of being based on need. Regardless of the motivation for more testing, one fact remains: policymakers are expected to be prudent with tax dollars “allocating funds where they make the most difference” (Fowler, 2009, p. 328).

Due to former research that establishes a connection between the public’s ideas and media reports, and the amount of public policy and spending that center on testing, this study is necessary. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the themes of stories local newspapers report in North Carolina print sources in relation to standardized test scores.

Anticipations

This researcher anticipated that the majority of news stories with the words “test

scores” would deal with local politics and school board business with little actual reporting about test score results. Of those strictly about results, this study also expected to show that the majority were presented negatively. This researcher also expected more authentic coverage of test scores to be published in *The Raleigh News and Observer*, which includes the *Chapel Hill News*, than the other papers in the study because the paper, based in the state capital, produces coverage on state politics. A further anticipation was that most sources quoted in the news stories would be “officials” and not teachers, parents, or students.

Procedures

This researcher used a content analysis from a 2-decade span on newspaper articles about standardized test scores to evaluate for topics including school board, funding, curriculum, scheduling, athletics, scandal, and results looking for negative terms such as “failing,” “falling,” or “down”; or positive terms such as “climb,” “increase,” “gain.” This study attempted to compare whether there is a difference in the content from 1994, 2004, and 2014. Those years were chosen because the federal government passed NCLB in 2001 and the law was signed in 2002. The law required that all groups of students be 100% proficient by 2014 (Holmes, 2009). To have a true comparison of articles, the content needed to be evaluated before the law, afterwards, and at the time of this study with the most updated reporting on scores coming from the 2013-2014 school year. For content analysis, this researcher manually scanned the local news, editorials, and opinion column sections from 1994 in *The Winston Salem Journal*. Online results from *The Winston Salem Journal* were not available for 1994. The database America’s Newspapers yielded results using a basic Boolean Search for the words “test scores” for the other years and newspapers. George Boole created the type of search allowing

databases to be scoured for words using connectors such as “AND,” “OR,” and “NOT” (Burris, 2010). The newspapers used in the study were *The Charlotte Observer*, *The Fayetteville Times*, *The Raleigh News and Observer* which includes *Chapel Hill News*, and *The Winston-Salem Journal* for the years included. Each of these newspapers represents a metropolitan area of the state of North Carolina with wide-ranging publication.

Limitations

For the purpose of this study, editorial letters written by the public were not evaluated. The research took into consideration editorials written by the newspaper staff as they represent the “official” stance of the newspaper on issues.

Examination of stories in *The Charlotte Observer* was restricted to articles dealing with North Carolina school systems. Charlotte’s metropolitan area stretches in the neighboring South Carolina and news coverage at times reaches South Carolina school districts. Since this research focuses on North Carolina testing policy and reports, South Carolina was excluded.

Also, this study assumed accuracy in prior studies referenced here.

Conclusion

Chapter 1 began with the writer’s worldview, a discussion of qualitative research, writings on constructivism or making meaning as you go, and parents’ views on testing and schools.

Chapter 2 looked at historical and political context including the school choice movement, North Carolina’s Excellent Public Schools Act of 2013, desegregation efforts, *A Nation at Risk*, NCLB, and the ABCs of public education.

Chapter 3 reviews the literature surrounding public schools’ effectiveness,

academic rankings, the agenda-setting of the media, standardized testing, proficiency, public opinion, education reporting, and media history, criticism, and influence.

Chapter 4 discusses the methodology of content analysis. Articles found through America's Newspapers Database using Boolean search "test scores" for *The Raleigh News and Observer* which includes the *Chapel Hill News*, *The Fayetteville Observer*, and *The Charlotte Observer* for the years 1994, 2004, and 2014 are included. A similar electronic search was conducted for *The Winston-Salem Journal* for 2004 and 2014. Since electronic results were unavailable for the *Journal* for 1994, this researcher manually scanned all newspapers using microfilm in the calendar year searching for any school stories. Those stories were narrowed to those that just dealt with reporting on test results.

Chapter 5 presents and discusses findings.

Chapter 6 concludes with a connection of the findings to the existing literature and in the broader context of public education.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

This chapter is composed of several parts including a look at agenda-setting in the media, public opinion of media and education, the purpose and advance of the media, a brief history of public schools and standardized testing, and related media studies that serve as a background for this new study which intends to discover themes of North Carolina newspaper reports on standardized test scores.

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, reforms in education have kept the academic performance of schools in the public's eye. At times, the reforms have come faster than they could be measured. As some called it in Fabrizio's (2006) study, North Carolina reforms were described as the "flavor of the year" (p. 107). Other writers contribute to the idea that reforms are short-lived. "Because schools have been unable to articulate the results they seek, they have become susceptible to following the education fads *du jour*" (Dufour & Eaker, 1998, p. 14). Following fads is one criticism of North Carolina's educational policy. The ABCs of public education went into effect in 1996. At the time, John Dornan, the executive director of the North Carolina Public School Forum, a "think-and-do-tank," said, "we literally tried every good and dumb idea that came down the pike in the '80s" (Fabrizio, 2006, p. 51).

A key element in reform is to sell the idea that something needs to be "fixed." Tyack and Cuban (1995) wrote, "The first stage in reform was to convince citizens that the present system of schooling was inefficient, anachronistic, and irrational" (p. 112). NCLB and the increase of charter schools and of private school vouchers continue the discourse on the effectiveness of public education (Rothstein, 1998, p. 6). The authors of *A Nation at Risk* reported the U.S. was falling behind academically. Falling behind was part of the North Carolina reform known as the ABCs. Former Governor Jim Hunt said,

“the reason we had to do all this is that we had to have a work force in North Carolina that was competitive with the rest of the world. We had to make it work” (Fabrizio, 2006, p. 56). Due to *A Nation at Risk*, the ABCs in North Carolina, and NCLB, the prevailing idea was education reform was necessary for economic survival.

Due to the negative reports about education and the 2013 Excellence in Public Education Act in North Carolina, the tide in education policy is shifting. The shift makes evaluating the media’s role in education reporting, particularly on test scores, critical in this day. Fowler (2009) said policy formulation and adoption “attract ongoing attention from the media” (p. 195). This study tested Fowler’s contention. A review of the prevalence and themes of articles dealing with the words “test scores” determined if those articles are truly about test scores or if they deal with policymakers and issues. Fowler credited news coverage as an actor in policy creation, “Because the media must screen, select, and recontextualize information, they inevitably play a major role in the policy process (p. 156). For the articles that deal strictly with test results, those results were examined to see if they are presented negatively, positively, or neutrally. By looking at how newspapers report on test scores, a better idea of how the public forms opinions about schools evolved.

Media’s Purpose

To understand the power of the media, one must first understand the purpose of the media. Journalism students learn that the media serves as the “fourth branch of government,” a watchdog for corruption and an advocate for the people. Kilmer (2002) wrote of the love-hate relationship between the two entities. “The press and the government have often been adversaries in recent years, and yet they share the mission of instilling within the public a sense of civic responsibility” (Kilmer, 2002, p. 23). Kilmer

went on to describe how editors and politicians worked together after the Revolutionary War to mold public opinion. “The government depended upon newspapers to plant within citizens a pride in nationalism that flowered during the War of 1812. People respected the press as their mirror of the world” (Kilmer, 2002, p. 25).

The watchdog status gained momentum during the Watergate scandal when the media told the world a president had approved corrupt and criminal activities to gain an edge on those in another political party. Furthermore, the press is considered to play a “key role in our democratic system” (Hatchen, 2005, p. 33). Newsman and professor Hatchen (2005) said the “press as serving the public interest has become the popular as well as legal justification for protecting freedom of the press” (p. 33).

Given the idea the media acts as the fourth branch of government, the media is anti-institution. It serves as a watchdog. Institutions in American society include family, business, religion, and government. Ironically, the media sets out to oppose institutions but is, itself, considered an institution. Each year, several national polls ask members of the public how they feel about the military, the criminal justice system, banks, and more (Polling Report, n.d.). Included in the polls’ inquiries are questions about confidence in newspapers and television news as major institutions. Lumsden (2002) argued the media plays an integral role in human experience because of its status as an institution:

What separates today’s critics from their self-styled predecessors in the 19th century is that the early critics viewed the press as an external influence upon society. Today’s critics realize that the press is as inseparable from society as the nervous system is from the human body. (p. 64)

Taking the stance that the media is integrated into society and yet opposes institutions, the media is expected to keep a check on public schools. Public schools have

been an institution and thought to be the “great equalizer” according to the Massachusetts educator Horace Mann since the mid-1800s. Mann believed universal education opened doors for those of any class to achieve and erase poverty (Fowler, 2009); however, with equal access to all, public schools are also offered up for scrutiny for all because they operate in the public’s eye and require public investment. Public schools receive federal, state, and local tax money to operate.

Confidence in Media

While the role of the media has changed over the past century, the public still says the media helps keep an eye on political leaders. “Criticizing the press has long been a popular sport in America, if only because the press has long been so outspoken about our public officials and the establishment” (Hatchen, 2005, p. 52). In the early 1900s, “muckrakers,” as they were called, were to focus on reform. Journalists received the term from President Teddy Roosevelt who was disgusted as the investigative journalists of his day. He “derisively labeled them ‘muckrakers.’ The name stuck, though it became a badge of honor for some journalists” (Aucion, 2002, p. 210). Some muckrakers conducted undercover research to expose the mistreatment of mental patients in asylums. While Nellie Bly and the like may have intended to uncover the truth in an effort to bring reform, some could not disassociate the style from the disreputable type of journalism. “Yellow journalism,” as it was called, became associated “with crime, sex, catastrophes, questionable scientific discoveries, gossip, and trial by newspaper rather than jury” (Keeler, Brown, & Tarpley, 2002, p. 48). More than 100 years later, some would argue that journalists are still trying to shed the insult of yellow journalism. It “is the sneering pejorative perhaps most frequently associated with misconduct in newsgathering” (Campbell, 2001, p. 25). The goal of journalists is that if the public is given trustworthy

information, it will do the right thing (Evenson, 2002, p. 264).

In modern times, drastic undercover methods such as Bly's may seldom be used, while the overall mission of journalism remains the same: Present the facts in search of the truth. Professor Hatchen (2005) opined, "free speech is the best method of searching for and attaining truth. This value is similar to values found in both academic freedom and the scientific method of inquiry" (p. 34).

With a duty to investigate current events, journalists must act and write with ethics in mind. Scores of articles and research have been written on ethics in journalism with the first book in 1909. Eventually a group evolved known as a Society of Professional Journalists, whose code says journalists are to give audiences facts and an understanding of the facts free from bias to allow the citizens to make intelligent and informed decisions (Keeler et al., 2002, p. 50). Maeroff (1998) wrote, "Education belongs in the media. The media, ideally, belong to the people, and if any aspect of life goes uncovered, then the people will lack the full disclosure that helps democracy flourish" (p. 222).

Critics may question the unbiased nature of media with thousands of outlets nowadays including blogs, cable television news channels, online reports, tabloid newspapers, and more. A Gallup Poll study in 2015 found only 40% of Americans say they have a "great deal" or "fair amount" of trust and confidence in the media down from an all-time high of 55% in 1999 (Riffkin, 2015). Still, according to the Pew Research Center in 2013, more than 68% of those surveyed in 2013 said news outlets keep politicians from doing things they should not do. Those results reflect a 10% increase from 2011 (Dimock, 2013, p. 1). The same Pew report showed 28% of news consumers got their news from traditional newspapers, while 50% got their news from the Internet

(Dimock, 2013, p. 2). The Newspaper Association of America (NAA, 2013) commissioned Scarborough Research to look at readership in 2013 finding 69% of American adults read a newspaper or access it online in a typical week.

The downside is a drop in newspaper production due to economic forces. Newspaper readership is sagging in the 21st century compared to decades ago. According to the Project for Excellence in Journalism, their report State of the News Media in 2015 showed, “Financially, the newspaper industry continues to be hard-hit. Newspaper ad revenue declined another 4% year over year, to \$19.9 billion – less than half of what it was a decade ago” (Mitchell, 2015, p. 1).

Despite the decline in traditional readership, newspapers remain a constant over the past decades including the 20 years under examination in this study. The Pew Report acknowledges newspapers are shifting to digital formats, but most newspaper reading still happens in print (Barthel, 2015). Other research would point to the significance of newspaper reports despite staff job cuts, “whatever their growing weaknesses and the competition facing them, continue to do the ‘heavy lifting’ when it comes to informing citizens about matters affecting them” (Lacy et al., 2012, p. 35). The “heavy lifting” references the idea that television news can only look at issues on the surface, while newspapers can dig deeper.

While some polling shows the public has confidence in the media, other authors would argue against that level of confidence. Edwards and Cromwell (2006) blamed the media for supporting the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Of the public, the author of the book’s forward said, “No longer trusting what they read and see and hear, people are questioning as never before” (Edwards & Cromwell, 2006, page x). Edwards and Cromwell argued that the media can never be neutral because corporations, which have

agendas, own media outlets. The two authors listed conflicts around the world and even climate change as evidence that “media performance overwhelmingly promotes the view and interests of established power” (Edwards & Cromwell, 2006, p. 179). While Edwards and Cromwell might blame the media for promoting corporate agendas, thereby losing public confidence, writer Kilmer (2002) placed the blame more on politics:

The post Watergate-Vietnam quandary for both the government and the media has been the loss of public confidence. The 2000 presidential election of Republican George W. Bush after several weeks of haggling with Democrat Al Gore over votes in Florida indicates that dire distrust between the press and the government cripples both. (p. 32)

Obviously, there are plenty of critics of the media. A 2015 Gallup Poll found only 40% of Americans said they had a “great deal” or “fair amount” of trust and confidence in the media, which is typically down in election years (Riffkin, 2015). Hatchen (2005) reported that 23% of those in a survey saw print reporters as biased, while 42% saw television as the more pervasive of bias (p. 103). Hatchen went on to write, “Bias, it could be said, is in the eye of the beholder. If you agree with the slant, it’s news; if you don’t, then it’s bias or even ‘lies’” (p. 105). Bumper stickers proclaim “Don’t believe the liberal media”; and even the old saying, “If it bleeds, it leads” became the title of a book. As a phrase, “If it bleeds, it leads” presupposes the most emotionally disturbing news of the day is the story that will top a television broadcast regardless of its widespread impact. Kerbel (2000) specifically hammers television news going so far as to say every clip of video is edited to extract the most emotion from the viewer. Kerbel’s satirical look at broadcast news even prepares you, the reader, for the day you will be interviewed for a local news story. And Kerbel prepares future news writers too,

advising a story

should condense the important facts of the story into a sentence or two, embellished with ear-catching phrases. You should describe the victim—as “desperate,” “cut down in his prime,” “tragically in the wrong place at the wrong time,” or whatever selection strikes you as interesting as you glance through your news writer’s bible, the *Thesaurus of Clichés and Aphorisms*. (p. 31)

Kerbel (2000) said news directors and producers will pick the most dramatic footage from around the country, broadcast it to the audience, and then tell viewers the video is from somewhere far away from them. For all his cynicism of broadcast media, Kerbel does emphasize why broadcast media is important. His writing is strictly about broadcast but could be extended to print. He said, “We rely on television. Television helps us make sense of the world” (Kerbel, 2000, p xi).

Agenda-Setting of the Media

To make sense of the world, some would say, is the job of the media. Krippendorff (2013) explained, “not only do newspapers print what editors consider to be of public interest, newspaper readers also talk to others about what they read, and so make newspaper reading a public activity” (p. 79). While this project does not intend to show newspapers help form public opinion on schools, it is important to understand the concept known as agenda-setting for the context of this research.

Agenda-setting research in its basic form attempts to connect mass media, “occurrences in the real world, and the ways in which people construct these events in their minds” (Kwansah-Aidoo, 2005, p. 37). McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) landmark study in Chapel Hill showed voters learned about the overwhelming amount of information within 1968 political campaigns from the media. The authors did not

conclude people changed their attitudes about a candidate from media reports. The two examined media reports from television and newspapers in the Nixon-Humphrey race and surveyed respondents on what they believed to be the major issues. Comparing the two pieces of data, McCombs and Shaw concluded, “The media appear to have exerted a considerable impact on voters’ judgments of what they considered to be major issues of the campaign” (p. 180). The two concluded that there was a relationship between the emphasis of the campaign issues and the judgments of voters to the importance of campaign topics (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 180).

Cohen (1963) would be said to agree with McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) findings, or they with him, when he stated that the press “may not be successful much of the time telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (p. 13). After decades of agenda-setting research, McCombs and Shaw (1993) revised their original assertion: “Agenda setting is considerably more than the classical assertion that the news tells us *what* to think about. The news also tells us *how* to think about it” (p. 6). Consequently, McCombs and Shaw argued the news tells us *what* to think. Entman (2007) agreed with the revision, saying, “If the media really are stunningly successful in telling people what to think about, they must also exert significant influence over what they think (p. 165). Furthermore, McCombs and Shaw (1993) suggested that the media’s agenda becomes the social and political issues of state and federal lawmakers’ agendas.

Kwansah-Aidoo (2005) explained agenda-setting, saying the “audience determines what issues are important from the priorities of the media and attaches similar significance to them within their own personal agendas” (p. 37). One view contrary to McCombs and Shaw (1972) posited that presidential election campaigns are special.

“[T]he mobilization of election campaigns may bring the issue closer to people’s lives” (Qian, 2012, p. 20). However, Qian (2012) supported the need for this researcher’s look at the themes of the media reports on test scores, saying, “For those issues distant from the public’s everyday life, one does not have information channels other than the news media” (p. 20). Entman (2007) examined bias in the media. Entman indicated, “political communication research demonstrates, indisputable facts play only a partial role in shaping the framing words and images that flow into an audience’s consciousness” (p. 166). Entman argued the media’s presentation of facts shapes the rest of opinion. The presentation of those facts was important for this study, as 48% of parents report using reports in the news or other media to determine the quality of their child’s schools (Tompson, Benz, & Agiesta, 2013). Further, the 2013 Associated Press survey reported 35% of those surveyed said news reports were helpful to determine the quality of schools (Tompson et al., 2013).

Building upon McCombs and Shaw (1972), plenty of research projects have followed. Tan (2008) “found issue agenda setting exists among newspaper coverage, public opinion and legislative policies at both the national and the state levels” (p. v). Tan used stories from the *New York Times* comparing those stories to Gallup surveys on what the public perceived as important problems and further compared those to topics of congressional hearings. For the state level, Tan examined news reports in 14 states most popular newspapers measured against the number of bills introduced on particular topics. The agenda-setting effects were stronger in the Tan study at the state level than the national level. The state-level finding was important in this researcher’s study as she was examining newspapers reports published in North Carolina papers to determine how much attention was given to reporting standardized test scores. Tan reported, “due to

scarcer resources, state media depend more on information from state governments, place less emphasis on the adversarial roles (more emphasis on the interpretive roles), and are less critical of the governments' agendas" (p. 84).

Agenda-setting was supported by a researcher who investigated the number of reports on crime in Texas and the percentage of Texans who said crime was the most important problem facing the country. Ghanem (1996) used the Texas poll to establish the extent people were concerned about crime. Ghanem then examined the number of stories dealing with crime in the *Houston Chronicle* and the *Dallas Morning News*. He looked at the frequency and length of the stories. He also included the number of crime statistics from the Department of Public Safety. Ghanem was able to show that crime actually dropped in the early 1990s, particularly in Houston and Dallas, the hometowns of the newspapers under study, despite the public's fear about crime. Furthermore, he conducted a focus group asking them to rate each of six different articles "in terms of the degree to which the article would make them more fearful of crime" (Ghanem, 1996, p. 52). He included the broadest possible definition of crime incorporating even tangential issues like gun control and prison reform. Ghanem found through his study that the basic agenda-setting hypothesis was supported. That is "*what* is covered in the media affects *what* the public thinks about" (Ghanem, 1996, p. 78).

In education contexts, one researcher's results were mixed for the agenda-setting role for issues of public education. McCarley (1994) found in a study of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools from the Gallup Poll and examinations of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* some positive, some negative, and no correlation for the years she investigated. McCarley found the public focused on the issue of discipline while the media was not. She supposed it was because of the

respondents' experiences with their own children's behavior due the number of children in public schools during the time of study. The study's second hypothesis found school issues received more negative coverage in some years, more positive coverage in others, and neither more positive or negative in other sample years (McCarley, 1994). The year with the most news overall coverage was 1972; McCarley connected the coverage of schools to the U.S. Supreme Court order to integrate. Finally, McCarley linked the government's push on some issues as the reason for news coverage during those years. She included banning books, school prayer, and grades before sports as examples of the government's agenda that was reflected in news reports of the 1980s (McCarley, 1994). McCarley's conclusions are only speculation but certainly relevant in this examination. The government's agenda is expected to be a continuing theme in the reports on test scores in North Carolina newspapers.

Media Studies about Testing

Similar studies have been conducted on media reports but none exclusive to North Carolina. Rhoades's (2004) examination dealt with testing for a year and a half time frame taking more than 2,300 articles on educational testing issues from Educationnews.org, a site with a wide range of newspapers yielding individual news articles. Rhoades found the articles to fall under four major categories, or frames as she called it: Accountability, Market Forces, Analysis and Student Stakes. "The Accountability frame endorses the use of tests in large-scale decision making, holding public schools, teachers, and students responsible for steady improvements on test scores" (Rhoades, 2004, p. 168). Rhoades argued the Market Forces frame pressures the public, including policymakers, to push for more privatization and vouchers. She claimed the Analysis frame helps reformers push for a particular education policy by

using an examination of scores. In the Student Stakes category, the media reports are used to defend promotion policies, graduation, and educational programs. In sum, Rhoades found media reports build public attitude about topics. “According to the tenets of agenda setting, the frequent publication of pro- government educational testing news will result in public opinion that finds educational testing an important tool for educational reform” (Rhoades, 2004, p. 241).

In Rhoades’s (2004) review, she reported two prior studies (Hambleton & Meara, 2000; Koretz & Diebert, 1993) on NAEP found scores were oversimplified which resulted in misleading reports on educational progress. Berliner and Biddle (1995) agreed that published reports on testing have been misleading. They concluded, “By now it should be clear that American education has recently been subjected to an unwarranted, vigorous, and damaging attack—a Manufactured Crisis” (Berliner & Biddle, 1995, p. 343). They went on, “Nevertheless, this attack was waged with great vigor, was eagerly supported by prominent figures in industry, and was widely reported and endlessly elaborated on by a compliant press” (Berliner & Biddle, 1995, p. 343).

In 2000, the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) reported results of newspaper coverage on test results from 1990-1998. Overall, the study found the organization (NAGB and NAEP) continued to improve the press releases, which led to more accurate reports in the press. Multiple times, the NAGB found “the press might have had difficulties understanding” test score reports (Hambleton & Meara, 2000, p. 135). The study said phrases used in the stories’ text and sometimes headlines “seem to be technically inaccurate, invalid, and somewhat misleading” (Hambleton & Meara, 2000, p. 139). In regards to 1994 reading scores, the evaluators wrote, “It was not clear, however, that the press was distinguishing between increases and decreases and

significant increases and decreases” (Hambleton & Meara, 2000, p. 141). Interestingly, the acting U.S. Secretary of Education, Richard Riley, made a comment saying students needed to spend more time reading instead of watching television. His comment, according to the NAEP review, was picked up broadly by newspapers and became a highlight of many of the 1996 stories on scores (Hambleton & Meara, 2000, p. 144). In total, the review found the press did a good job of presenting numbers, but when reporters went beyond the numbers provided by NAEP and press release writers, the news stories became confusing and misleading (Hambleton & Meara, 2000, p. 143). Hambleton and Meara (2000) took ownership of the misleading reports saying that press releases needed to be clearer and provide a better explanation of descriptive statistics (p. 145).

One South Carolina examination of news stories about school bond referendums to build schools found a significant difference in the most commonly used words (Little, 1996). While Little’s (1996) study of South Carolina bond referendums was mostly quantitative, she examined whether negative or positive words were used to describe the bond campaign. She found words like “upgrade,” “renovation,” and “student” were used in positive stories. Negative accounts used words like “issue,” “cost,” “tax,” and “million” (Little, 1996). Little concluded that the study and existing literature “established strong support for the journalistic influence in shaping the news agenda” (p. 59).

Education Stories in Broadcasts

Instead of printed text, one study spanning 40 years, looked at television stories. While this current study examined newspaper articles, it is important to note findings from DeMoss (2009) who learned education news constituted a small fraction of the

overall television news coverage. DeMoss also found “the largest proportion of education news stories covered the South (27.3%) or were national stories (27.1%)” (abstract). The majority of the stories broadcast dealt with legal issues in education while the lengthiest stories dealt with academics. DeMoss justified his research saying the myriad of education initiatives for change and reform dictated his look at the media’s role in covering education. DeMoss used the Vanderbilt Television News Archive which publishes abstracts of television news stories. DeMoss found that education stories dealing with legal, legislative, and constitutional issues constituted the majority (30.8%) of the stories (p. 57). Next in his findings, 27.3% were stories dealing with health and safety. Academic stories accounted for 25.3%, nearly one fourth of the reports. Finally, business issues totaled 16.6%, about one of every six stories. Ultimately, his research showed education stories accounted for 1.32% of the overall stories broadcast by the five major networks which included ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, and CNN (DeMoss, 2009, p. 20). DeMoss concluded efforts to desegregate and the Columbine shootings were dominant in news coverage saying, “Sensationalism seems to be the main driver in the types and subjects for education news stories over the period examined” (p. 116).

Political Aspects of Education News

Another study found it was not sensationalism but politics that drove what reporters covered on education. Treyens (1997) found news stories about higher education in Ohio were more likely to be covered from the political aspects of a policy proposal rather than the actual substance of the policy. Treyens also concluded journalists were more likely to cover the concerns of policymakers than the concerns of what she called “education consumers” (p. 6). Treyens said, “the relationship between the media and policymakers is a reciprocal one with each needing the other to do their

respective jobs” (pp. 6, 200). She chose the two newspapers, *Columbus Dispatch* and *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland), to examine based on the papers’ staffing at the statehouse level and because she said television does not typically cover policy issues. Treyens examined the headlines, the sources cited in the stories, and word count. The dominant story during her study was the workload of college professors and the efforts from the capitol building to see that professors were in their classes more. Treyens found only in three articles where faculty members quoted leaving most of the discussion to policymakers. She suggested the media examine news stories early to insure the substance of the policy is covered instead of leaving the largess of the topic and tone to be set by policymakers (Treyens, 1997). She also recommended that readers throw aside the political aspects and conflict in the news stories to “get to the bottom” of what the story is actually about, the policy itself (Treyens, 1997).

A similar study of North Carolina newspapers revealed support for charter schools largely driven by newspaper reports. Carr (2015) conducted a discourse analysis dealing with charter schools finding four frames for the data: freedom, choice, equity, and accountability. The frames serve as a way to organize how the articles were presented. Carr also found that the “media’s embrace of the charter school movement was cultivated in strategic ways by its leading proponents, who skillfully maintained message consistency and discipline in their framing of the problems of public education and the promises posted by charter schools” (p. 115). Her examination posited that controlling the discourse on charter schools allowed the cap on the number of schools to be lifted and increased funding for two online virtual schools (Carr, 2015, p. 117). Carr offered the charter school movement as an example of how to successfully run a public relations campaign to affect the outcome of proposed legislation. Her research fell under the

category of discourse analysis because she operated from a perspective of race and politics wondering why charter schools in North Carolina serve more White children than poor and minority students (Carr, 2015, p. 122).

Another review of national newspapers from 2001 to 2012 found that news reports characterize schools as in “crisis.” Hogan (2013) looked at *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today* to examine whether news coverage since NCLB perpetuated the idea that schools are failing. Hogan’s examination found most stories fell under the frames (categories) of assigning blame or responsibility, context, or conflict. Very few articles in Hogan’s exploration could be categorized as sensationalism. While Hogan’s study identified the articles in more than one category, the dominant idea was “context” in 96.4% of the stories. Context was defined as stories that dealt with historical information, data, or definitions of solutions. The study also found assigning blame as the frame for 77.1% of the articles reviewed (Hogan, 2013, p. 45). An example of assigning blame might be placing fault on teachers for a school’s test scores (Hogan, 2013, p. 38). Lastly, more than half (58.7%) of the articles involved conflict. Hogan noted that reporting on conflict is important for journalists and readers to be aware of so the audience does not become cynical (as cited in Tamir & Davidson, 2011). Finally, Hogan reported the implications of her study include an awareness on the part of school administrators, journalists, and government officials that the negative language and themes could affect the way the “public perceives the success or failure of schools” (p. 68). She also prompted news sources to provide objective and comprehensive reports on education since citizens rely on those reports (Hogan, 2013, p. 68).

A national study in 2010-2011 supported Hogan’s (2013) findings that much

media coverage deals with education in “crisis” (O’Neil, 2012, pp. 15-16). O’Neil (2012) described the crisis frame or category as one that presents education facing “insurmountable problems beyond repair” (p. 15). According to O’Neil, stories were presented about American students’ performances compared to international rankings and only 20% included solutions to the “crisis.” The review of printed, broadcast, and online story-telling found reports dealing with funding and accountability, not what is happening in classrooms (O’Neil, 2012, p. 5). O’Neil concluded by writing media coverage after the review of 570 stories presented a “narrow story of education” (p. 17). O’Neil argued the public’s understanding of education is “aligned with the media’s narratives” (p. 17).

A self-described supporter of school choice found in his research that news coverage of education and schools was up 7.7% in 2014 compared to the average coverage for the prior 25 years (Campanella, 2014). In a review of 5,000 news sources, Campanella (2014) said 25% of all news stories dealt with sports, special events like open house, or funding. He also claimed that the two story topics that “consistently received the most significant news coverage” for the past 25 years were funding and school choice (Campanella, 2014, p. 11). He also found that coverage of standards and testing peaked in 2001, the lead-up to the passage of NCLB (Campanella, 2014).

Despite studies on newspapers’ treatment of schools and education, little research exists specifically on media reports about test scores. Researchers have conducted content analyses on reporting about crime, health, war, and reporting on children and television. Even content analyses on gender in textbooks, political speeches, and television reality shows exist. Herein lies the reason a qualitative study was necessary. Qualitative studies usually investigate “a concept is ‘immature’ due to a conspicuous lack of theory and previous research” along with a need to develop theory in this topic

(Creswell, 2014, p. 110). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the themes of the content of newspaper reports within major North Carolina papers on standardized test scores.

History of Standardized Testing

Whether standardized testing is fair, accurate, or useful is not the focus of this study. Plenty of researchers have looked at the biased nature of testing and critiqued the number of tests administered (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Ford & Helms, 2012; Johnson, 2005; Kohn, 2000a; Ravitch, 2011; Wiliam, 2010; Wilkins & Jones, 2009). Kohn (2000a), a longtime opponent of high-stakes testing, testing that determines promotion, award of a diploma, or a school's growth rating, said testing marks a "dark period of American educational history" (p. 315). Some argue high-stakes tests are popular because it "is thought these tests will raise standards in a state's lowest achieving schools" (Amrein & Berliner, 2002, p. 9). Agree with the tests or not, they are here to stay in some fashion.

Some trace the origin of standardized tests back to psychologist E.L. Thorndike. He believed anything that exists, exists in a quantity and can be measured (Ozmon & Craver, 1986, p. 68). As Ozmon and Craver (1986) described, the testing "movement has accelerated in recent years in conjunction with the clamor for 'cost-effectiveness' and a 'systems approach' to education. The movement has been directed toward finding some way to gauge teacher effectiveness and student performance more efficiently" (p. 68). Butts and Cremin (1953) would agree testing came with advances in psychologists' training. In *A History of Education in American Culture*, Butts and Cremin said spelling tests in the late 1800s "were the beginning of a measurement and evaluation system" which gained steam from that point (p. 439). Butts and Cremin wrote of objective

measures of learning through scientific tests, testing the two credit with educational philosophers who believe in “essentialism” (Butts & Cremin, 1953, p. 494). Essentialists believe there are certain attributes a group of people must have. In the case of testing, essentialists believe there is a certain body of knowledge a student must have, and that body of knowledge can be measured (Butts & Cremin, 1953, p. 494). Kohn (2000a) contributed to the theory of tests for measurement, saying Americans have a “cultural penchant for attaching numbers to things” (p. 316).

Others trace testing back to politician and educational reformer Horace Mann. As mentioned earlier, Mann established public schools as a way to ensure young people became productive citizens of their country (Butts & Cremin, 1953, p. 217). In 1845, he created tests to administer to the brightest Boston scholars, called “brag scholars” by the testing committee (Rothstein, 1998, p. 17). He wanted to compare schools (Fowler, 2009). Even back in the 1800s, test results were shaky. A testing of the “best” students showed Mann students knew the date of a key embargo but few knew what “embargo” meant (Rothstein, 1998, p. 17).

In Caldwell and Courtis’s work (as cited in Garrison, 2001), Garrison (2001) explained how testing evolved. Garrison explained Mann did not use the term “achievement test” but clearly intended to use a standardized procedure to determine what and how much students in the Boston schools learned (p. 118). Garrison continued that testing developed as a way to measure what he called “natural aristocracy” instead of relying on bloodlines to determine social and intellectual standing in the world (p. 73). Garrison cited philosophical ideals from Plato and Jefferson as the basis of Mann’s rationale that learning develops good citizens. To determine if the student has learned, their knowledge must be measured. Garrison discussed that early “testing” relied on

recitations, question and answer sessions, and other oral exercises. Garrison believed the teacher was responsible for classifying and certifying students based on their responses. With the advent of the cheap printing technology and the push to systemize questioning, Mann helped advance standardized testing; school systems across the country adopted Mann's exams. Garrison declared that Mann argued printed tests could be longer and more thorough than the prior oral exercises. Garrison contended it was through this testing that accountability switched from the teacher's responsibility to the states' responsibility. Ultimately, Garrison claimed that with Mann's new exams, Mann was able to "prove" that schools were ineffective; thereby, he was able to push through reforms including tax funding and secular schools for all students (p. 158). This was known as the Common School Movement. Later in the 1800s, Joseph Rice conducted the first large-scale educational evaluations using "test scores from many districts to evaluate spelling instruction" (Fowler, 2009, p. 311).

At the turn of the 20th century, French psychologists Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon invented the intelligence test often called an IQ test (Butts & Cremin, 1953, p. 337). Binet's testing of memory, attention, and intelligence helped set a standard for "normal mental ages" of children (Butts & Cremin, 1953, p. 337). Garrison (2001) argued Binet and Simon "were operating with the idea of organizing class society along lines of mental ability" (p. 150). Garrison continued with his thesis that standardized testing came into being as a way to replace the aristocracy and still have a way to organize social echelons in our world.

Binet and Simon's measurements of intellect came just as World War I was coming into view. Haney (1981) wrote widespread standardized testing for "military personnel selection" during the War led to "broad popular attention" on testing in the

United States (p. 1022). What was called the Army Alpha Test for literates was given to 1.7 million men in World War I (Haney, 1981, p. 1022). Bracey (2000) criticized the tests saying the multiple-choice format became a way to test and score results quickly and cheaply (p. 13).

Another reason, according to Linn (2001), for an increase in testing was an increase in the number of students going to school (p. 30). When the number of students outpaced the population growth, schools started using tests to determine tracks for students (Linn, 2001, p. 30). Based on Linn, the idea of using test scores to compare schools is not new and in fact dates back to the early 20th century (p. 30).

Shortly after the testing boom began, Haney (1981) reported the College Board began using the multiple-choice SAT in 1926 as part of its admissions testing program (p. 1023). Haney related the focus on testing came to a peak in the 1960s when the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) provided “financial assistance for school testing programs” (p. 1024). This time period, of course, marked the United States’ space race with The Soviet Union and the fear that the United States would fall behind in world supremacy. Haney said the 1960s was also the time when The National Merit Scholarship Corporation goal to identify top students began to gain traction. Then, in the 1970s, there was much written about IQ tests and discussion on which race had genetic factors that inherently could score higher on the tests (Haney, 1981, p. 1025).

Haney (1981) reported the mid-1970s brought reports about SAT test score declines (p. 1026). The College Entrance Examination Board under the leadership of Willard Wirtz investigated a 14-year decline to conclude that, in part, more students were now taking the test leading to a drop in scores. The board report authors said the public was concerned because the drop was

widely perceived as the serious deterioration of the learning process in America. More and more high school graduates show up in college classrooms, employers' personnel offices or at common checkpoints with barely a speaking acquaintance with the English language and no writing facility at all. (Wirtz, 1977, p. 8)

The Wirtz (1977) report blamed the increase in elective courses at the high school level for a drop in "less thoughtful and critical reading" and said "careful writing has gone out of style" (p. 27). The report continued saying absences were now condoned, a grade of "A" or "B" did not mean what it once did, and that grade-to-grade promotion was almost automatic (Wirtz, 1977, p. 29). The panel concluded the change in educational standards was partially to blame for the score decline. Furthermore, the College Board panel resolved the troubled time period, which included the Vietnam War, and a "marked diminution in young people's learning motivation" were to blame for SAT test score declines (Wirtz, 1977, p. 48). The Wirtz panel called the period "a decade of distraction" with assassinations, war, police beatings, and Watergate (Bracey, 2000, p. 27). Many of these conclusions were included in a chapter the Wirtz panel titled "Circumstantial Evidence." Since part of the blame for a drop in scores was placed on schools, Haney (1981) reported minimum competency testing was put in place for potential high school graduates, to identify students for remedial instruction, and for grade-to-grade promotion (p. 1026).

Testing Terms

In North Carolina, report card scores for schools and districts are based on proficiency, the number of students who "pass" the tests. Students earning a level three or higher are deemed to have "passed" state tests. NCDPI (n.d.b) said a level three means the student has a sufficient command of grade-level knowledge and skills but may

need academic support to be successful at the next grade. According to Bien (2013), “Words like ‘data’ and ‘proficiency’ were never defined, yet discursively constructed meanings of these ideas were infused into, very literally, all aspects of teaching and learning” (p. 10).

Another standardized testing term is norm referenced. Kohn (2000a) said tests were never designed to measure the adequacy of instruction or student capabilities (p. 318). Instead, he said, they were meant to rank students against each other with the pattern of results to be the same each time. Each score is a reference score compared to the norm, the usual. For example, “exactly 10% of test takers will score in the top 10% and half will fall below the median” (Kohn, 2000a, p. 318). Kohn (2000a) said a student at the bottom may have reached understanding but not impressively so compared to his classmates. Because tests are norm referenced, they must be renormed from time to time to guarantee a statistical spread of 50% above and 50% below the median (Kohn, 2000a). Renorming means the tests are always changing.

Finally, a phrase associated with testing is “high stakes.” The term refers to decisions on whether to promote or retain, or even award a diploma to a student based on scores (Kohn, 2000a). A high-stakes score can affect whether a teacher gets a bonus or reduction in salary (Kohn, 2000a). High-stakes results can lead to more or less funding for a particular school or even whether the school closes (Kohn, 2000a). Principals can be suspended or fired based on scores from high-stakes tests (Kohn, 2000a).

Public’s View of Schools

The general public, according to poll results released in 2014, believes schools in their own community are performing better than schools in the nation (PDK/Gallup Poll, 2014). For example, 12% of those surveyed believe public schools in “your own

community” should be given a score of “A,” 38% a “B,” 31% a “C,” 11% a “D” and six percent chose Fail. Nearly 70% believe an “A” or “B” is an appropriate grade. However, contrast those responses with how Americans feel about our nation’s schools. For that 2014 question from Gallup, only 1% thought schools in the United States earned an “A.” Sixteen percent believed a “B”; 51% felt a “C” was an appropriate letter grade. Nineteen percent believed a “D,” and 10% felt the public schools in the country are failing (PDK/Gallup Poll, 2014). As Gallup poll researcher Bill Bradshaw pointed out, this line of questioning is similar to responses where Americans say they do not like Congress but in contrast favor their own congressmen (Bradshaw, 2014).

Similar results came in 2013 polling in North Carolina. In 2013, the Elon University Poll found 51% of those surveyed would give their community’s public schools an “A” or “B.” Twenty-six percent of those answered a “C,” and 9% a “D.” Five percent in the Elon poll said an “F,” and 9% did not know. The Elon poll results were similar to the national poll but somewhat lower for the positive impressions of public schools (Fernandez, 2013).

Smith and Imig (2014) asked a similar question during their poll of North Carolinians to find that 77.3% of respondents say their child’s school should receive an “A” or a “B” grade. When all those who worked in public schools were siphoned out of their 2014 study, 72.3% still felt the public schools their child attends deserved an “A” or “B” grade (Smith & Imig, 2014, p. 19).

A further national study in 2014 by an organization that did work for President Barack Obama during his campaigns showed that roughly two thirds of the public support neighborhood schools and teachers. The Democrats for Public Education (2014) study reported 82% of those surveyed would rate local teachers “excellent,” “very good,”

or “good” (p. 1). Authors said those who “castigate public schools and teachers are simply out-of-step and out-of-touch with the American people, parents and voters” (Democrats for Public Education, 2014, p. 1).

Despite positive survey results about schools and teachers, one wonders about confidence in education as an institution. Public confidence in institutions was the subject of a 1999 study by researchers Moy, Pfau, and Kahlor. The three asserted public cynicism of all institutions is increasing. Other writers agree with the issue of cynicism. Loveless (1997) presented Watergate and the Vietnam conflict as just two reasons public cynicism, in general, is increasing (p. 137). Citing prior research, Moy et al. claimed “media coverage undermines confidence by focusing on ‘attack and counterattack’ including dismissal of the status quo” (p. 138). An interesting part of Moy et al.’s study is the findings showed the more a citizen reads the newspaper, the more confidence he/she has in schools. The researchers admitted, contrary to their expectations, television news viewing also led to more positive ideas about schools (Moy et al., 1999). This researcher would argue that an awareness of school events and problems gives the reader or viewer a more balanced look at the schools. The better educated someone is about the issues allows the well-educated person to make better overall judgments about matters, in this case about schools. This researcher’s conclusion is buoyed by other media studies. For example, Qian (2012) found “the mass media show stronger impact on those with low levels of general political knowledge than on those with high levels of general political knowledge” (p. 10).

Public’s View of Tests

Meanwhile, survey results show test scores are concerning to parents but to a lesser degree than in years past. Thompson et al. (2013) used a 2010 survey by the

Associated Press, where results showed 55% of parents said low test scores were a serious problem in education in the United States. In 2013, only 31% of those surveyed said low test scores were a concern (Tompson et al., 2013). Further Gallup poll results show that less than half of Americans feel that standardized tests help teachers know more about their students' academic achievement (45% helpful, 54% NOT helpful). Even fewer parents believe standardized test results are useful (31% helpful, 68% NOT helpful; Bradshaw, 2014). "In 2013, the annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll on public schools found that 22% of Americans believe increased testing has helped the performance of their local public schools, while 36% say it has hurt those schools" (Gallup Report, 2014, p. 10).

Despite the findings that most believe standardized tests are not helpful to teachers, 35% of Americans surveyed in the poll released by Gallup in 2014 said they are very supportive of testing to determine if students should be promoted from one grade to another. Forty-three percent were somewhat supportive. Only 14% said they were not supportive, and 7% said not at all supportive (PDK/Gallup Poll, 2014).

The most important viewpoint on testing comes from parents, the direct stakeholders in the results. Paris (1992) called it a "paradox" because parents want information but do not understand the information regarding testing (p. 97). Research with the general public shows the majority of those surveyed (74%) "support requiring students to pass a basic-skills test to be promoted to the next grade" (Jacobson, 2002, p. 3), but the respondents provided different opinions about the role of standardized testing.

About 25 percent said linking promotion to the next grade to performance on a test would help schools identify and help those students who need extra attention. But an equal percentage said they were concerned that focusing too much on

testing would force teachers to “teach to the test.” (Jacobson, 2002, p. 3)

Teaching to the test was part of a parent survey given by researchers in Arkansas in 2000. “Teaching to the test” has become a phrase known in education circles to mean that teachers are focused on test preparation within their classrooms (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Kohn, 2000b). It also implies that teachers have moved away from creative and critical thinking for students and instead focused on rote memorization and multiple-choice questioning (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Bracey, 2000; Kohn, 2000a). “Teachers are taught to anticipate what will be on the test and teach the students only that material, leading to students having vague, if any, understanding of any other concepts they may need” (Reddell, 2010, p. 7). Test critic Kohn (2000a) blamed not the teachers but the tests, saying they “fail to tap deep understanding” (p. 317).

While the 2000 Arkansas study found concerns about teaching to the test, the bigger concern was the stress on students related to standardized testing going back to even kindergarten-aged students. Fifty-five percent of those in the survey said testing was significantly or extremely important (Osburn et al, 2004, p. 83). The study also reported “two out of three parents felt testing was not a waste of time” (Osburn et al., 2004, p. 83). The researchers concluded, “Despite what the popular press may imply, this study indicated that parents are not overly anxious about standardized testing, nor did they feel that their children are” (Osburn et al., 2004, p. 88); however, the researchers admitted the survey was conducted in a district with high performance and only a couple of low-performing schools. Surveying parents of students who do well on standardized tests would certainly yield different results than parents in a district where students struggle. It is also worth noting the researchers cited no evidence from the “popular press” saying parents and students were anxious about testing. While there have been

studies conducted to evaluate stress levels among students and teachers due to testing, this Arkansas study offered none. Critical in the survey was information from parents saying they were “not getting results explained to them” (Osburn et al., 2004, p. 89). The discussion suggested that schools work more collaboratively with parents to explain standardized testing and the results.

Paris (1992) extended the notion that parents need more information explained to them, writing,

They rely on teachers’ or media reports to interpret the data. This is a perilous act of blind faith because teachers and the media are often unable to explain the technical aspects of tests or give more than a cursory summary of the scores.

Newspapers in the United States routinely misinterpret testing and misuse the scores to make invidious comparisons among schools but there is no concomitant “accountability” for such misinterpretation to the public. (p. 97)

Moses and Nanna (2007) elaborated on Paris’s (1992) ideas saying the testing language is technical and ““scientized”” (p. 64). They say the academic and scientific jargon needs experts to decipher “leaving the general public to feed only on the bits of information that find their way into the media and political arena” (Moses & Nanna, 2007, p. 64). Yettick’s (2013) research supported this hesitance to report on education research with reporters she interviewed saying they find the research confusing and they lacked the expertise to make judgments about the studies.

In addition to the interpretation that says testing language appears scientific, some question if testing helps schools. In the annual PDK/Gallup Poll (2015), researchers found the public does not believe standardized testing is the way to improve schools. In fact, the title of the annual poll for 2015 was “Testing doesn’t measure up.” The polling

group decided to take a closer look at testing in the wake of the opt-out efforts in New York and Seattle in 2015 where parents and students boycotted state standardized testing (Todd, 2015). Gallup respondents ranked “standardized testing lower than other approaches to measuring student progress such as examples of student work, grades awarded by the teacher, or written observations by the teacher” (PDK/Gallup Poll, 2015). In the 2015 Gallup survey, 64% of the public and 67% of parents said there was too much emphasis on standardized testing. By contrast, only 26% of those surveyed felt there was too much testing in 2013 according to an Associated Press study (Tompson et al., 2013). The Gallup survey found more support for testing among Republicans, Blacks, and Hispanics (PDK/Gallup Poll, 2015).

Other studies viewed how members of differing cultures looked at standardized testing. On the whole, the groups (Middle Eastern and White) supported the use of testing to compare teachers, districts, administrators, and schools (Donegan & Trepanier-Street, 1998). The survey found a lack of support for the emphasis on testing among teachers. Probably most significant for the purpose of the current study is

On a local level, this information has influenced the real estate market, decisions by business and industry, and individual decisions regarding housing and school choice. At both the local and state levels, standardized test results have influenced decisions regarding funding levels for schools, the recognition and retention of teachers and administrators, and the accreditation of schools.

(Donegan & Trepanier-Street, 1998, p. 92)

Paris (1992) reinforced the idea that testing goes back to money, saying, “Measuring students’ achievement is critical for politicians and policymakers who need to assure the public that schools are educating children successfully” (p. 96). The tests

allow measures to determine how much money and resources to allocate (Paris, 1992, p. 96). The measurement is one reason North Carolina instituted testing in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Former North Carolina Governor Jim Hunt, called the education governor, served the state from 1977-1985 and then again in 1993-2001. He said, “I want more money for the schools, too. But I want to measure how well we are doing with the money and how much the children are learning” (Hunt, 2001, p. 51). Berliner and Biddle (1995) offered astonishment that the public believed what they called the “Big Lie” (p. 127) about “failing” education in light of the money spent on schooling. “This gullibility continues to surprise us, since public education is such a large part of the American experience, and since it requires such a huge investment of public funding” (Berliner & Biddle, 1995, p. 65).

North Carolina Educators’ Perceptions of Tests

According to Kafitz (2006), school board members and superintendents are more likely to believe that “standardized tests are an accurate measure of student performance and achievement” than school principals (p. 128). Kafitz used interviews to determine what kind of testing two North Carolina Local Education Agencies (LEA) administer, particularly those beyond state mandates, how they use the results, and whether principals and staff are trained to interpret results. Kafitz also found that superintendents, school board members, and principals were concerned that members of the public did not understand testing programs. Lastly, Kafitz concluded that all of those interviewed believed decisions made about individual student performance “should not be based exclusively on End of Grade/End of Course tests” (p. 116). Kafitz concluded that districts are conducting local assessments to prevent sanctions and to monitor achievement of students.

Summary of Literature

To summarize, this literature review has examined studies about agenda-setting theory, which holds that the news media plays a consistent and significant role in creating and sustaining public interest in certain topics and issues (Cohen, 1963; Ghanem, 1996; Kwansah-Aidoo, 2005; McCarley, 1994; McCombs & Shaw, 1972, 1993; Qian, 2012; Tan, 2008). In other words, the news media literally helps set the agenda for public discourse and political action by choosing or selecting which topics and issues to focus attention on and which to ignore (Cohen, 1963; Ghanem, 1996; Kwansah-Aidoo, 2005; McCarley, 1994; McCombs & Shaw, 1972, 1993; Qian, 2012; Tan, 2008). As Cohen (1963) indicated, the news media may not tell people what to think, but it does tell people what to think about (p. 13). This new intended study does not propose to connect the publication of stories about test scores with the public's ideas on testing because there is no data set to make that connection; still, agenda-setting is a concept that cannot be ignored.

The literature review has also examined the purpose and origin of the media, confidence in the media and other institutions, and news reports on public education (Barthel, 2015; Carr, 2015; DeMoss, 2009; Dimock, 2013; Hatchen, 2005; Hogan, 2013; Keeler et al., 2002; Kilmer, 2002; Lacy et al., 2012; Rhoades, 2004; Treyens, 1997). The analysis has also provided some history of public schooling (Fowler, 2009; Garrison, 2001), history of standardized testing (Butts & Cremin, 1953; Fowler, 2009; Haney, 1981; Linn, 2001; Ozmon & Craver, 1986; Rothstein, 1998; Wirtz, 1977), opinion polls on testing and education in general (Bradshaw, 2014; Donegan & Trepanier-Street, 1998; Gallup, 2014; Hunt, 2001; Jacobson, 2002; Kafitz, 2006; Osburn et al., 2004; Paris, 1992; PDK/Gallup, 2015; Reddell, 2010; Todd, 2015), and hinted at some criticisms of

standardized testing (Ford & Helms, 2012; Johnson, 2005; Ravitch, 2011; Wiliam, 2010; Wilkins & Jones, 2009).

In existing literature regarding media studies, this examination has looked at a study on television reporting on education issues with results showing how little time is devoted to the topic on major networks (DeMoss, 2009). Also included is a look at the government's influence on education reporting (Treyens, 1997) and a study on the frames or categories under which reports on testing were included (Rhoades, 2004). Similar studies to the one proposed include Hogan's (2013) examination of the concept of "failing schools" and how pervasive that idea is in published reports nationwide. Lastly, Carr (2015) investigated North Carolina editorials and news articles to find newspaper reports helped charter school proponents gain power.

In this researcher's fairly exhaustive and comprehensive review, there are no studies on what North Carolina newspapers actually report about test scores. As outlined in the introduction, this examination is critical due to the fast-paced rate of legislation from the North Carolina General Assembly dealing with public, private, and charter schools (Center for Education Reform, 2015; Clark, 2015; Fernandez, 2013, 2016; Fitzsimon, 2015; Frohlich, 2014; High Point University Poll, 2016; Hui, 2015; Johnson, 2005; Kafitz, 2006; North Carolina DPI, n.d.a.; Prothero, 2015; Smith & Imig, 2014; Wake County Public School System, 2001; Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, 2015). This new study is particularly relevant since North Carolina has served on the vanguard of the standardized testing movement as a form of accountability in the United States since the 1990s (Carr, 2015; Hunt, 2001; Johnson, 2005).

Chapter 4: Methodology

This study included a qualitative media content analysis of print news coverage of standardized testing in North Carolina schools to discover the themes of attention given in those reports. “Content analysis methods can be used to track messages over time, to assess changes or detect trends” (Kondracki, Wellman, & Amundson, 2002, p. 227).

This was not a study about how newspaper reports shape perceptions of public school success, although earlier chapters looked at public perception of schools to gain a context of the reason for the study. Since there is no study uncovered that asks how people get their information about standardized testing, Krippendorff (2013) suggested the content analysis replaces public opinion surveys. Schreier (2012) agreed, writing, “Researchers who use QCA (qualitative content analysis) frequently assume that there is a reality ‘out there’ and that this reality is represented in the material under analysis” (p. 47). This research differs from quantitative research, which attempts to discover what affect variable X has on variable Y. For qualitative studies, the researcher examines a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2014); in this case, the phenomenon is themes of news reports.

This researcher examined newspaper reports from 1994, 2004, and 2014 to determine if the numbers of news stories changed and the perspective the stories present through phrasing, word choice, and sources used. The number of stories gave some information but was not the focus (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005). Researchers said, “If the analysis stopped at this point, the analysis would be quantitative, focusing on counting the frequency or specific words or content” (Kondracki et al., 2002). Weber said the qualitative research goes beyond word counts to “classifying large amounts of text into an efficient number of categories that represent similar meanings” (as cited in Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Qualitative research can be used solely for descriptive

purposes (Babbie, 2007). Babbie (2007) continued, “This approach begins with observations rather than hypotheses and seeks to discover patterns and develop theories from the ground up, with no preconceptions, though some research may build and elaborate on earlier grounded theories” (p. 380). Furthermore, qualitative analysis can look at inferred meanings, also known as latent meanings, to help develop theories (Kondracki et al., 2002, p. 224). Kondracki et al. (2002) continued writing latent content is often “the more interesting and debatable” part of communication (p. 225). Zhang and Wildemuth (2005) added an examination of themes and patterns “allows researchers to understand social reality in a subjective but scientific manner” (p. 1).

The research was an inductive analysis, meaning categories and patterns emerged from the data (Kondracki et al., 2002). Furthermore, it was expected the categories may need refinement as the study evolves (Kondracki et al., 2002). Hsieh and Shannon (2005) reported the researcher should plan to include exemplars for each code and category identified by the data by having exemplars for each. The study used qualitative analysis “a relatively systematic process of selecting, categorizing, comparing, synthesizing, and interpreting to provide explanations of the single phenomenon of interest” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001, p. 462). McMillan and Schumacher (2001) continued saying the analysis is a gradual process. “‘Making sense’ of the data depends largely on the researcher’s intellectual rigor and a tolerance for tentativeness of interpretation until the entire analysis is completed” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001, p. 462). German researcher Schreier (2012) agreed, writing, “data in qualitative research is not standardized, but requires an active effort at interpretation on the researcher’s side” (p. 20). Schreier said, “Data never ‘speaks for itself,’ it does not ‘have’ a specific meaning” (p. 2). Schreier credited psychologist Fredrich Bartlett with the idea that

recipients construct meaning. Schreier attested that qualitative research fits in a constructivists' worldview because of what she described as "emergent flexibility." The researcher continues to adapt and change as the researcher collects and begins to analyze the data (Schreier, 2012, p. 24). As the data are compared, they are triangulated to determine recurring themes (Fowler, 2009, p. 319). Creswell (2014) suggested the researcher may start with 30-40 codes, then reduce the overlap and redundancy to 20, and then collapse those codes into five to seven themes. As Krippendorff (2013) explained, "Text driven content analyses are also called 'fishing expeditions'" (p. 355). This researcher is hopeful to discover the themes of news reports on standardized test scores.

Content analysis is different from other methods of qualitative study in that the researcher did not interact with participants. Typical qualitative studies involve focus groups or case studies. A researcher selecting interviewees has to make sure the participants are comfortable and the controlled environment allows the honest and accurate responses to the research questions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). In this case, the objects of study were newspaper articles published from 1994 to 2014. The articles were discovered through electronic newspaper database searches and combing the newspaper archives on microfilm. This study in researcher terms was "unobtrusive" because the analyst did not have an effect on what is being studied (Kondracki et al., 2002).

Schreier (2012) said the process of qualitative content analysis (QCA) inherently provides validity. Schreier observed, "QCA always requires you to follow the same sequence of steps, regardless of your research question and your material, it is a very systematic method; and by being very systematic, QCA is also reliable" (p. 34).

Krippendorff (2013) suggested that having the context unit as large as is meaningful

contributes to the validity of the study (p. 102). For this reason, the unit is defined as an entire news story including the headline.

Coding

Eventually, the data were divided into parts to classify each; this is known as coding. As the data were collected and analyzed, they were compared and contrasted to examine each topic and category. Schreier (2012) described QCA as a way to reduce the material (p. 80). “Reduce” becomes a method and a philosophy through content analyses. The reductionist theory “attempts to take complex data or phenomena and explain it in simple terms” (Riffe, 2014, p. 4). Coding can be based on concepts or everyday knowledge with the idea that “you vaguely know what to expect” (Schreier, 2012, p. 86). Schreier also suggested once categories are developed, the researcher may want to develop subcategories. This strategy is called subsumption (Schreier, 2012, p. 88).

In this study, the unit of analysis was each news article. They, too, were the units of coding. This unit of coding allowed the coder to mark the article under a category based on a holistic reading and understanding of the article’s topic. If the unit of coding was something else, a phrase or paragraph, the article could be coded into more than one category; multiple codes could cloud the results, which would defeat the purpose of the study to discover themes. By default, the context of the entire article was required “to interpret meaning” (Schreier, 2012, p. 133). Since the goal of this study was to describe, the same material was used for the trial of the coding frame and the main coding. Experts suggest coding a trial amount of data and then recoding it 10-14 days later to look for discrepancies before coding all the material (Schreier, 2012, p. 157). Schreier (2012) said in some ways it is better to “try out your coding frame on part of the very material on

which you will carry out the main coding” because it allows you to obtain an in-depth description (p. 148).

Why Newspapers?

Due to the broad year span for the study, the research artifacts stayed constant by looking at newspaper reports instead of electronic web logs or electronic versions of the newspapers. In 1994, the beginning of this study, the use of the Internet for email, instant messaging, and certainly as a news source was just getting its wings. Local newspapers are the place to get news on school board debates and news of interest to communities. A Brookings Institution study reported local journalists are closer to the community and more likely to report on school issues than reporters at the national level (West et al., 2009). Furthermore, Hatchen (2005) wrote that the news hole, the space left over after advertising, comics, features, etc., is bigger in print media than television (p. xix). While broadcast is a newer technology, the average news hole for network television news is just “21 minutes to tell everything” (Hatchen, 2005, p. xix).

While one could examine television and radio broadcast for this topic, a Pew Research Center study released in 2013 shows 28% of news consumers get their news from traditional newspapers, while 50% get their news from the internet, which publishes an electronic version of the newspaper (Mitchell, 2015). Cohen (1963) described the reasons investigating newspapers for content can outweigh the benefits of examining other types media, saying, “The products of the newspaper press are not so ephemeral as those of radio and television . . . is more extensive and thorough” (p. 8). Cohen looked at the coverage of foreign affairs in newspapers in the early 1960’s. Cohen also wrote television and radio rely heavily on wire reports which are generated from more of the newspapers’ press. Finally, he said examining newspapers is warranted because the

news-gathering and editing processes in the radio and television networks seem to proceed on the same bases and in terms of the same assumptions and in response to the same range of attitudes as the news-gathering and editing process in the newspaper press. (Cohen, 1963, p. 8)

Graber (1988) would agree with Cohen (1963), arguing that newspapers are much better for detailing abstract concepts than television. Another reason newspapers are appropriate for the study is because “most news is mainly of local or parochial interest” (Hatchen, 2005, p. 7). A Brookings Institution study found local journalists are more likely than national media to report on “curricula, teacher quality, and structural reforms” (West et al., 2009, p. 2). Further, a self-proclaimed school choice advocate found in his research that local, regional, and state media outlets were three times more likely to cover K-12 education and schools than national outlets (Campanella, 2014).

From a practical standpoint, analyzing newspaper reports allowed the researcher to examine the words in the stories instead of getting transcriptions from television news broadcasts to examine those words. There are computer programs that aid in transcribing broadcasts. Still, untold man-hours would have been devoted to transcription of television news, whereas the words are on the page for newspaper reports. Furthermore, this former television news reporter realizes that television news is broadcast from a visual standpoint. Reports about education are difficult to edit for one-and-a-half minute stories because editors must rely heavily on building exteriors and file footage of students in class. With privacy laws, students are not to be identifiable in news video, forcing the photographer to often get pictures from the back of the classroom of little heads leaning over desks or looking forward at the teacher in the front. Visually, television news stories about schools and education are unappealing, and as DeMoss (2009) found,

infrequent. Brookings Institution authors concluded it is difficult to follow education debates and understand how to improve student performance due to the “paucity of coverage” (West et al., 2009). This study examined the idea of “paucity” based on the number of stories uncovered dealing with test scores.

To better understand the themes of what newspapers report on standardized testing and scores, an in-depth study is necessary. The study is relevant in times of fast-paced reforms at the national and state level affecting teaching, learning, and spending. A Brookings Institution study found academics know very little about what the news media reports about education despite this being the avenue where most families get their information (West et al., 2009). This new study described the types of reporting about test scores in four major North Carolina newspapers within a 20-year span to include an examination of the word choices, sources used, rhetorical devices, and copy length.

Why Content Analysis?

A researcher would use content analysis, as described by Riffe (2014), to draw inferences about meaning or infer something about a type of communication. Experts express “content analysis is often an end in itself” (Riffe, 2014, p. 13). Riffe said, “one cannot study mass communication without studying content” (p. 31). Furthermore, it is a typical practice to study content across time and organizations. Therefore, this study examined a 20-year span from four different publications. For the purpose of research, the examiner reviewed news stories with the words “test scores” in the headline or the body of the article. While the stories were pulled from a basic unit of meaning, the analysis was more holistic by categorizing the phrase “test scores” from the context of the entire article. The articles were categorized based on the theme of the story. In many content analyses, researchers have used “liberal,” “conservative,” and “neutral” as the

categories (Riffe, 2014, p. 61). Assuming all news stories in this study were not political, the researcher allowed categories to evolve as the research developed. The stories for examination in a preliminary search using simply the terms “test scores” yielded more than 1,500 articles. It is important to have a broad sample to have a better estimate of the population (Riffe, 2014, p. 79). The results were analyzed by simply looking at the frequency of occurrence to determine what is typical or unusual (Riffe, 2014, p. 139). Findings were further analyzed to look for common phrases and words. For example, Hogan (2013) found a theme of “failing schools” was repeated in her analysis.

Historical Content Analyses

One of the first content analyses was one commissioned by the church in the late 17th and early 18th centuries to see that nonreligious materials were not creeping into worship (Krippendorff, 2013; Schreier, 2012). Hymns were analyzed for the frequency of the words like “God” and “Kingdom of Heaven.” Later researchers conducted analysis of newspapers to see that the content was objective, ethical, and ““edifying”” (Schreier, 2012, p. 10). In what Schreier (2012) described as the second phase of content analysis, newspapers were examined, for example, to see how Blacks were represented in the press (p. 10). Standard practice became an examination of whether a topic was presented positively, negatively, or neutrally (Schreier, 2012, p. 11). During World War II, content analysis really came into being to investigate propaganda from the perspective of how it was created and how it was received (Krippendorff, 2013; Schreier, 2012). Later, content analyses began to look at the psychological side. For example, how people interacted with each other and their motives was at the core of analysis (Schreier, 2012, p. 12). In the educational arena, content analysis examined the readability of text based on sentence length and average word length (Schreier, 2012, p. 12).

Data Collection and Sample

The data sample was collected through online and manual searches. For the 1994 *Winston-Salem Journal*, any article dealing with education was copied from microfilm, printed, and then read to determine if it dealt with test scores. For the other newspapers (including the *Winston-Salem Journal* for 2004 and 2014), the database America's Newspapers was searched using key words "test scores" for the calendar years 1994, 2004, and 2014. This search alone yielded more than 1,500 articles from the four newspapers to investigate. Any "article" written strictly by a member of the public whose opinion is published in the editorial pages was excluded. The reports for review included editorials by the newspaper staff, which would indicate the newspaper's official stance on a matter. Also, articles dealing with test scores in South Carolina, likely published in *The Charlotte Observer*, whose coverage bridges both North and South Carolina, were excluded for the purpose of this study since North Carolina newspapers were under review.

Given the large volume of articles found in the search, systematic sampling was used to select the articles for review. To assure proportionality of each of the individual newspapers in the study, every fifth article was reviewed and coded. If that particular article has nothing to do with the topic of this research, the reader simply chose the next article in the "universe" or population of text to be studied" in the sample (Kondracki et al., 2002, p. 226). Coders reviewed 300 articles for the study.

Reliability

Reliability comes to the study through the consistent measure applied to the articles (Schreier, 2012, p. 6). Schreier (2012) continued saying objectivity of the study will lead to findings that are independent of the researcher (p. 23). To ensure reliability,

the researcher pulled articles for trial coding from each of the newspapers under study for a pretest. Krippendorff (2013) said a pretest should ensure dimensions are clear and unambiguous to “assure the independent coders would have a high agreement” (p. 130). A trial coder examined the trial articles using a coding sheet (Appendix) developed before the study. The lead researcher examined the same articles using the same coding sheet. The trial coder and lead researcher compared coding to determine the percent of agreement. This is computed by comparing the number of articles agreed upon divided by the total body to yield a percentage (Krippendorff, 2013). Typically, agreement of .80 or better is considered acceptable in most situations, and agreement of .90 or better is always acceptable (Hogan, 2013). After the trial coding period, the same articles were recoded and entered into the main study per the recommendations of QCA expert Krippendorff. The entire body of text was then coded and recorded onto coding sheets (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005, p. 4). The data from the coding sheets were transferred to a spreadsheet to create frequency tables, which present findings on the topics or themes or the articles. Beyond the tables, a qualitative examination of sources used, rhetorical devices, and tone in the articles yield information about the “role the media plays in the policy process” (Fowler, 2009, p. 156). Entman (1993) wrote of how categories are organized, saying salience elevates the subject of the communication. Entman said salience “means making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences” (p. 53). After all the data had been coded, the researcher explored the categories’ characteristics, relationships between categories, and themes and patterns (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005).

Newspapers in the Study

For the study, the researcher examined articles from *The Charlotte Observer*, *The*

Raleigh News and Observer including the *Chapel Hill News*, *The Winston-Salem Journal*, and *The Fayetteville Times* for the years included. Each of these newspapers represents a metropolitan area of the state of North Carolina with wide-ranging publication. The papers also represent a broad section of the state geographically. Fowler (2009) supported using multiple newspapers in the study as she referenced Graber's idea of "Swiss cheese journalism" (p. 157). Graber, as cited in Fowler, said this type of journalism is news coverage that "omits numerous important public events and issues" (p. 157). By looking at several papers, the researcher can determine the trends and patterns for more than one newspaper. Furthermore, Fowler wrote that news coverage in some states, including North Carolina, is fragmented into several large markets within the state. "In these places, some coverage of state politics is provided, but none of the markets (except the one including the state capital) offers thorough reporting of it" (Fowler, 2009, p. 157). Due to North Carolina having several major news markets, an examination of more than one newspaper helped the observer draw conclusions about the themes of news coverage on test scores.

Numbers from the NAA in Arlington, Virginia reports *The Charlotte Observer's* circulation at 134,406; *The Raleigh News and Observer* including the *Chapel Hill News* at 128,905; *The Winston-Salem Journal* at 50,390; and *The Fayetteville Observer* at 43,306 in March of 2014 (Bo Inscho, membership database coordinator, NAA, personal communication, August 5, 2015). According to the NAA, among the four newspapers, this is a 37% drop in circulation since 2004. The NAA does not track online reading; therefore, one should not conclude there has been a 37% drop in readership of these papers (NAA, 2013). Still, as mentioned earlier, based on the Pew Research Center, nearly 78% of people get their news either from a traditional newspaper or the paper

published online (Mitchell, 2015).

To better understand the newspapers under review, one must consider their ownership. The communications company McClatchy bought the *The Charlotte Observer* in 2006 and *The Raleigh News and Observer* in 1995. Prior to 2006, Knight Ridder owned the Charlotte paper. Experts have long considered *The Charlotte Observer* and *The Raleigh News and Observer* some of the best in the business (Hatchen, 2005, pp. 8, 10). The conglomerate Berkshire Hathaway is famously known for its chair, Warren Buffet, who owns Fruit of the Loom, Geico, and Helzberg Diamonds and also has significant holdings in Coca-Cola and Wells Fargo. Berkshire Hathaway now owns *The Winston-Salem Journal* (Wikipedia, 2016); but for the years 1994-2014, Media General, a Virginia-based television, newspaper, and radio company, owned the Winston paper. Finally, Fayetteville Publishing, a family-owned company, owned *The Fayetteville Observer* in the years under investigation. While the four newspapers were chosen primarily because of the regions of the state they serve, they also represent a variety of owners from a major business traded on the public stock exchange, to a media company, to a family-owned company. If findings from each four remain consistent, it may negate the commonly held belief that the publisher influences the content like those publishers of early years.

The two publishing giants of the early 20th century, Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, had a great interest in politics. Hearst, in particular, saw himself as president-maker, lining up support for or opposition to candidates from the chain of newspapers he had put together across the country. (Swanburg, as cited in Risley, 2002, p. 20)

Since there is a broad spectrum of types of paper ownership under study, any publishers'

biases could be refuted provided there is a trend in the type of articles about standardized test scores the papers circulate. Table 1 examines the daily circulation and ownership of the North Carolina newspapers included in this study based on information provided by each of the newspapers' business offices.

Table 1

Daily Circulation

Daily Circulation	Newspapers			
Year	<i>The Charlotte Observer</i>	<i>The Fayetteville Observer</i>	<i>The Raleigh News and Observer</i>	<i>The Winston-Salem Journal</i>
1994	236,768 (Knight Ridder)	70,020 (Fayetteville Publishing-family owned)	131,395 (Daniels-family owned)	90,275 (Media General)
2004	229,440 (Knight Ridder)	67,338 (Fayetteville Publishing-family owned)	173,329 (Daniels-family owned)	85,531 (Media General)
2014	123,683 (McClatchy)	38,418 (Fayetteville Publishing-family owned)	112,549 (McClatchy)	45,725 (Berkshire Hathaway)

Circulation data provided by Jermaine Burns, circulation, budget, and planning manager for the Charlotte Observer. July 22, 2016. Fayetteville data provided by circulation administrative assistant Janet Person. July 22, 2016. Raleigh News and Observer data provided by Jim Puryear, VP for audience development. September 27, 2016. Winston-Salem Journal information was provided by the WSJ library staff, Craig Rhyne, on August 17, 2016.

Time Spent Reading the Newspaper

Beyond dwindling circulation numbers (Table 1), is the question of how much time people spend reading newspapers, which is reportedly on the decline. According to

research presented in the *Guardian*, time spent reading a newspaper went down from 21.9 minutes in 2010 to 16.3 minutes in 2015 (Sweney, 2015). Few stories, 18%, according to Graber (1988) are read in full (p. 249). Graber continued with “two out of every three stories have been excluded” when a reader finishes the newspaper (p. 249). Other studies have fewer minutes devoted to newspaper reading. Moser (2014) reported that in 2012, the average American spent 8.24 minutes reading a newspaper. A report by the Reynolds Journalism Institute shows those surveyed in 2012 said they spent 39.92 minutes a day reading local newspapers (“Survey: Community papers,” 2013). While the minutes per day vary widely depending on the research cited, the total amount of time spent reading newspapers, which might happen to have a story about scores and testing, is small.

Research Procedures

For content analysis, this researcher manually scanned the local news, editorials, and opinion column sections from 1994 in *The Winston Salem Journal*. A manual scan of 1994 WSJ articles was necessary because archives for that year do not exist in an electronic database. The database America’s Newspapers yielded results using a basic Boolean Search for the words “test scores” in *The Charlotte Observer*, *The Fayetteville Times*, *The Raleigh News and Observer* including the *Chapel Hill News*, and *The Winston-Salem Journal* for the years included. All articles remained in the review regardless of the stance on testing; however, since a preview shows more than 1,500 articles, every fifth article was coded and recorded.

A voluntary peer reader with a master’s degree in curriculum and instruction used the same coding scheme as the primary researcher to analyze a smaller sample of the items in the trial data set. These same items were used in the main data set. Any

differences in coding were reviewed and resolved between the peer reader and lead researcher to inform the final analysis. Krippendorff (2013) suggested that coders have the “same cultural/educational/professional background” as the content analysts (p. 129).

A coding sheet, adapted from Treyens (1997) and Hogan (2013), was used in the study. The recording included the title of article, date, word count, page number, sources, rhetorical devices, (persuasive language intended to evoke emotion) and any other notes the reader deems relevant. The tone of each article was evaluated to determine if it is positive, negative, or neutral towards education and towards testing.

Data were displayed through frequency charts comparing each newspaper and the types of articles published and the year published. The frequency of particular topics allowed the researcher to conclude if a particular theme is dominant. Beyond the frequency charts, an examination of the words and phrases used in the stories emerged. For example, Hogan (2013) found negative language in news stories about schools could affect the public’s perception of schools. In particular, her examination looked at the theme “failing schools” as presented in newspapers.

Also, important for review are the sources quoted in the articles. As Treyens (1997) found, most often policymakers are quoted in news articles versus the professors. Kafitz (2006) found that superintendents and school board members were more likely to value standardized assessments than building principals. Examining who is quoted in the articles allowed this review to draw conclusions about who is driving the conversation about testing, accountability, and results (Fowler, 2009). Information from policymakers is important because as Fowler (2009) said of the public, “They expect education leaders to act prudently, allocating funds where they make the most difference and eliminating worthless programs” (p. 328). Still, the researcher considered whether reporting includes

parents, students, and teachers, the people directly involved with testing.

Situation of the Researcher

This researcher earned her undergraduate degree in broadcast journalism at UNC-Chapel Hill, and worked in television and radio stations in Chapel Hill; Raleigh; Charlotte; Columbia, SC; and Memphis, TN. Following a 14-year broadcast career, she earned a Masters in the Art of Teaching degree at the University of Memphis and taught high school English there. In North Carolina, she also taught high school English, served as an instructional facilitator (lead teacher) at a middle school, worked as an assistant principal at an elementary school and middle school, and now serves as principal at an elementary school.

While she initially worked at the elementary level, the state passed a law called the Read to Achieve Act saying all students must be proficient in reading by the end of third grade. For two summers, she acted as a “principal” at the summer reading camp where students worked on reading for 4 hours a day. Many of these students could read and understand what they read but could not pass the standardized tests. I have no evidence to support their abilities only some of my work one-on-one with them or in small groups. Some of the preparatory passages had what I would call “tricky” questions. For example, one question dealt with what would be needed for a family to visit the beach. The student was to choose the elements necessary for a visit with one option reading “fair weather.” While the purpose of the question was to help students understand that words can have more than one meaning, asking a student about “fair weather” is unfair. A check of Merriam Webster’s online dictionary shows the definition of “fair” dealing with weather--not stormy or foul--is the seventh entry. An 8-year old is supposed to recognize the German meaning of the word used before the 12th century to

help him/her pass a third-grade reading test.

My experience with capable students who began to lose their confidence because of a standardized testing helped frame this study. There was one boy who helped me when I substituted as a bus driver. He could tell me every turn, every stop, and every move I needed to make on the route; and he was in third grade. However, he could not pass the EOG for third-grade reading. Obviously, he was plenty smart. I figured few adults could do as fine a job as he in guiding me on the bus route. I began to wonder if the “public” knows the kinds of questions offered on the tests. Parents, policymakers, even educators know the downside of a student who cannot pass a reading test; but do they really know what kind of questions are on the tests? For example, in released tests for high school biology, the question asks, “What will most likely be the results if all the mitochondria are removed from a plant cell?” My own biases—science was my least favorite subject—say that gifted, accomplished students can make it in the real world without knowing the answer about mitochondria. Obviously, this knowledge is useful if the student intends to pursue a career in the medical field and research.

My other bias as a former reporter positions me as a defender of the news business. I believe the average “street reporter” does the best he/she can daily to illuminate a topic within the one-and-a-half minute broadcast. In Memphis, I was once assigned to cover the release of test scores for the district. I remember worrying that the press release written by the district, which applauded an increase in scores, might be the “spin” district officials wanted me to report. I remember wondering how could I analyze the numbers and compare them to the prior year’s scores. I was beholden to district officials to provide the prior year’s scores. Ultimately, I went on the air with the information the district provided and that was broadcast city-wide as a fact. Due to

deadline pressures, I could not completely investigate and interpret what the scores meant and present them on air concretely. In an interesting twist, later that summer a principal at a year-round school in Memphis retired after a testing scandal exploded at her school. I was able to break the story in the local news market. The principal had reportedly asked teachers and teaching assistants to erase multitudes of answers, change them, and turn them in on the standardized tests. The story died there because she retired before any charges could be brought forth.

From both my background as a reporter and now as an educator, I am keenly interested in reporting on test scores. My frustrations with recent political moves at the state level also generated this study. Policymakers have passed laws to include more testing, allow vouchers for private school tuition, and admit more charter schools in North Carolina. As a product of public schools, and the only person in my immediate family to graduate with a 4-year degree, I believe public schools are not failing. Reports such as *A Nation at Risk* helped perpetuate that idea (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Rothstein, 1998; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). I am seeking some concrete information on news reports on testing to help determine why the idea continues that schools are in sore need of repair.

Chapter 5 presents the findings and Chapter 6 includes recommendations for further study and conclusions.

Chapter 5: Findings

The purpose of this research was to discover themes and patterns in newspaper reports on standardized test scores. The study examined four major North Carolina newspapers from different parts of the state: *The Charlotte Observer*, *The Fayetteville Observer*, *The Raleigh News and Observer*, and *The Winston-Salem Journal*. Articles were included from 1994, 2004, and 2014 to see if coverage varied during the separate years.

Initially, the researcher started with about 1,500 articles searching the database America's Newspapers using the term "test scores." Systematic sampling of every fifth article was used for the study's pool of stories. Editorials written by the public, not the newspaper staff, were eliminated from the study since they do not represent the official stance of the newspaper. Articles about South Carolina schools, sometimes found in *The Charlotte Observer*, were taken out of the sample because the focus was to be on North Carolina newspaper reports. Duplicates of articles appearing in the 1,500 count were tossed. Stories titled "News Briefs" or "Quick Takes" were removed from the sample, because they were too short to code. Occasionally, the article did not deal with testing and was thrown out. For example, if the story was about a quarterback facing a "test" to see if he could "score," the article was deleted from the pool (Batten, 1994; Deacons' Lewis, 1994). Also removed were restaurant health inspections (Restaurant health inspections, 2004). If an article was thrown out, the researcher went to the next story in the list and coded it. The more than 1,500 articles were culled to 1,171 after all the duplicates and stories that did not belong in the study were removed. The systematic sampling left 300 articles for the study. Once the base of stories was narrowed to those dealing with testing and education, the researcher took every fourth article for trial

coding.

The lead researcher and a trial coder with a similar educational and socioeconomic background conducted open-ended coding on the articles for topics. Per Krippendorff (2013), the coders should have comparable experiences. The coding sheet included a record on the article's topic, the tone about education, the tone about testing, rhetorical devices used, sources quoted in the article, page number, and word count. Notations were also recorded if the article mentioned NCLB or the ABCs of education, a North Carolina testing and accountability program. Each coder read the complete article before deciding on a topic. Of the articles that both coders read, there was agreement on 60 of the 69 stories' topics or 86.9%. Wimmer and Dominick as cited in Hogan (2013) wrote that agreement of .80 or better is considered acceptable in most situations.

After the open-ended coding, the lead researcher was left with 71 different categories for topics. The 71 categories were easily and quickly combined into 15 categories. For example, stories on test quality, test renorming, testing changes, testing preparation, and score reports were all combined under the heading of "Scores and Testing." Articles about charter schools, magnet schools, private schools, and home schools were combined into a category called "School Choice." The collapsing of categories led to 24 articles that did not fit comfortably into any category. Those articles were grouped in a miscellaneous category representing 8% of the entire study.

Definitions of Categories

The most dominant category with 50 articles was accountability. Accountability stories focused on reaching state or federal standards set for testing through various initiatives and laws. Oftentimes, the terms NCLB or ABCs of public education were found in the accountability pieces (Achenbaum, 2004a; Helms, 2004b; Ustinova, 2004)

Accountability differs from scores and testing because the scores and testing stories were more focused on the tests themselves or a basic reporting of scores. Some of the topics combined for the testing category include test preparation, test quality, and test renorming (Hui, 2014c; Smolowitz, 2004d). In the study, 32 stories belonged to the scores and testing category.

The next recurring topic of curriculum, scheduling, and grading, with 34 stories, dealt with things that happen during the actual school day. Some stories challenged new curriculums such as Common Core; others dealt with whether enough rigor was provided in the classroom or through certain programs (Ataiyero, 2004; Silberman, 2004b, Varela, 1994a).

Oftentimes, stories about testing were reported in the context of how funding affects programs that districts offer to affect teaching and learning. Twenty-eight funding stories dealt with local and state monies provided to schools and hinted at how such funding affects scores (Wellington, 1994; Wireman, 1994b). For example, in Wellington's (1994) article, the state school superintendent blasted the senate for not fulfilling budget requests. Superintendent Bobby Etheridge said lawmakers ignored his request to spend \$135 million on the state's Basic Education Program, a program that outlined subjects, curriculum standards, and staffing (Wellington, 1994).

Profile stories included pieces that surrounded a person, and in one instance about a particular school. These stories would be considered "soft news" or a feature in journalism, lacking a hard-hitting issue (Fedler, Bender, Davenport, & Kostyu, 1997; Smith, 1991). Twenty-four stories profiled students, teachers, principals, or schools. An examination of these stories showed novel approaches to teaching and learning that explained the character's or the school's success (Perlmott, 1994; Wireman, 1994a).

Race was a common thread in 19 stories with the words “test scores.” These stories frequently discussed the achievement gap between minority and nonminority students in test scores (Hannah-Jones, 2004a; Simmons, 2004a). Other stories dealing with race examined how to set up school boundaries for student assignments to achieve a racial balance (Norwood, 1994).

Another category discovered in the study indicated issues of race and funding but was separate in emphasis. Equity appeared in 14 stories. These stories met the definition of equity because the articles dealt with underfunding or a lack of opportunities in some schools or systems. Some chronicled how poor counties are forced to operate school systems using fewer resources (Durham & Helms, 2004). Several included a discussion on magnet status at schools or gifted programs in the context of offering parity for students (Chappell, 1994c).

Fifteen school choice articles dealt with either magnet, charter, private, or home schools. Some articles talked about taking away magnet status or adding that standing to public schools (Hui, 2014a). Others dealt with performance of home school students or finances within charters (Helms, 2014h; Simmons, 1994).

Campaigns for office appeared in 12 stories categorized as election stories. These sometimes enumerated candidates running for office who talked about test scores as a reason they were fighting for a seat in an election (Collins, 1994; Nimocks, 1994).

Scandal was the central theme in 12 stories. A prevailing story during the years under review was the controversy over athletes’ classes at UNC-Chapel Hill and whether the players were “given” grades for classes that did not meet (Kane, 2014a; Kane, 2014b). Another topic in the scandal category focused on testing irregularities at an eastern North Carolina school and whether anyone would face consequences (Oliver,

2004).

The category of students and teachers encompassed stories about free breakfast, mental health and motivation of students, teacher pay, teacher effectiveness and more (Barnett, 2014; Barr, 2014b; Betts, 2004; Helms, 2004a). These 15 stories were placed in the student and teacher category because the articles dealt with the people in the school and their impact on student learning and test scores.

Nine of the stories about a volatile issue deliberated redistricting and reassignment of students to new or existing schools to achieve balance within a district (Bell, 2014b). Parents were regularly quoted in these stories questioning the plans to redraw lines for attendance (Lyttle, 1994a).

Conflict was a topic in just six stories. By definition, conflict is implicit in all news stories (Smith, 1991). However, these stories were categorized as conflict because the story focused on a disagreement or issue without a resolution (“Unnecessary Test,” 2004).

A category called college includes six stories. These mostly discussed topics of applying for college or what to look for at a college fair. Four of the six articles fell in a special section produced in 2014 by *The Charlotte Observer* called “Countdown to College” (“Academic Achievers,” 1994; Bierer, 2014a, 2014b).

Since all stories could not be placed in a specific topic or theme, there were 24 articles grouped in a category of miscellaneous. Most mentioned test scores tangentially. For instance, one about employees arrested at a school for a drug operation made a note of test scores at the school (Gordon, Lyttle, & Baccellieri, 2014). Another discussed how President Obama decided to include the issue of test scores and education’s role in global competitiveness in his 2014 State of the Union address (Schram, 2014).

Prominence

The prominence of an article indicates the belief that the story affects more people and deserves placement in a high focus area of the newspaper (Ferguson, Patten, & Wilson, 2001). Prominence for the purpose of this study was determined using the page number on which the article appeared and the word count. Prominence in this study should not be confused with the element of prominence for news coverage (Ferguson et al., 2001; Smith, 1991). For example, prominence as an element for selecting the news to cover would include the wedding of a celebrity (Ferguson et al., 2001; Smith, 1991).

Eighty-seven articles of the 300 were published on the front page of the newspaper, indicating the publishers felt the stories deserved high prominence (Ferguson et al., 2001; Utt & Pasternack, 2003). Front-page articles are those considered to be the most important news of the day (Ferguson et al., 2001; Utt & Pasternack, 2003). Sixty-six articles were included somewhere else in the “A” section of the newspaper, still a place of prominence in newspaper design. As one editor said, the front page is intended to get the reader to turn the page (personal communication, Jon LaFontaine, Hickory Daily Record, October 10, 2016). LaFontaine supported the idea that page one news intends to drive readers to the inside pages. Research supports that 97.7% of front page articles “jump” to the inside pages (Utt & Pasternack, 2003, p. 7).

The next section evaluated in the study is the front page of the second section, often called “state and local” or the “B” section. The “B” section yielded 59 articles on the front. Thirty-two articles appeared somewhere else in the “B” section of the paper. The rest of the articles (56) appeared in sections other than the “B” front page or local section. Some were in special sections that the newspapers included which focused on certain North Carolina counties: Iredell, Cabarrus, Gaston, and Union. The placement of

the stories allowed this researcher to conclude the newspapers believe in informing the public well on issues surrounding testing and scores, since the majority of stories were given a prominent position in the papers (Smith, 1991).

Other issues of prominence include if a picture or graphic is included with the article (Smith, 1991). Also, if the article features a quote highlighted in a bigger font than the article itself, that is an attribute that contributes to the article's prominence (Smith, 1991). Since the majority of the articles were pulled from an electronic database with only the text of the article itself, this examination does not include whether the stories included eye-catching details such as large font headlines or pictures to draw in the reader (Smith, 1991).

Word Count

Word count is another way to indicate the prominence or significance a news operation places on a particular story (personal communication, Danielle Ivory, The New York Times, October 7, 2016). While word count does not always indicate a more "important story," as Ivory said, word count indicates the paper has dedicated time and staff to those topics. In turn, those stories may take a longer form (personal communication, Danielle Ivory, The New York Times, October 7, 2016). Those stories believed to have an impact on readers are often given what is called more "column inches" in the newspaper (personal communication, Kelly McBride, October 31, 2016). Column inches is a term designed to indicate how much of the newspaper page is used and usually applies to advertising (Smith, 1991). More column inches means the company paid more for the advertisement to make it bigger to gain the reader's attention (Smith, 1991). For news stories, column inches indicate the amount of space is dedicated to a particular article (Billings, 1992). "The number of words to an inch depends on the

size of print and column width of the paper” (Billings, 1992). For example, a 10-column inch story would be considered to be a more important story than an eight-column inch. Billings (1992) wrote the average story is about 800 words at the newspaper where she writes.

Typically, stories are written in the style called the “inverted pyramid” with the most important information placed at the top and the rest in descending order of importance till the end of the story includes minutiae (Billings, 1992; Ferguson et al., 2001). This style allows the editor to cut the bottom of the story if it does not fit the length of story needed for the paper (Billings, 1992; Ferguson et al., 2001). The average word count in the examination of articles contained 805 words. The word count ranged from 136 words in a 2014 report on how many third graders were proficient in reading at the beginning of the year to 7,238 words in a 1994 article about 19 people running for school board in Gaston County (Chappell, 1994b; Silberman, 1994). Throwing out those two outliers put the average word count at 785 or more than 26 column inches. This, too, would indicate the stories under review were given a high-prominence value for the publications according to an expert at the Poynter Institute (personal communication, Kelly McBride, October 31, 2016).

Type of School

Coding to determine the type of school included in the reviewed articles was relevant to better understand how test scores are associated with various facets of education. As might be expected, given that more than eight-and-a-half billion dollars are spent on kindergarten through twelfth-grade students in North Carolina’s most current budget, the majority of articles were about public schools (North Carolina Senate, 2016). Two hundred fifty-eight articles, or 86%, were about public schools. As Hatchen (2005)

reported, most news is of local interest; therefore, newspapers have an obligation to cover local schools. Since testing mandates (Fitzsimon, 2015) affect public schools, and North Carolina state law says public schools must be graded based largely on proficiency rates, it would be expected that the majority of coverage dealt with public schools. It also stands to reason that public schools would dominate coverage since state and local taxes fund about 90% of school operations (Leachman, Albares, Masterson, & Wallace, 2016).

Colleges and universities accounted for the next biggest number for the type of school related to news reports on testing with 17 stories. The rest of the 25 news stories included home schools, charters, private, or magnet schools; and in one case, public, private, charter, and home schools.

Tone on Education

The articles were also coded for the tone on education to determine if the stories were positive, negative, or neutral. Word choice, quotes used, and the article's organization all contribute to the tone (Richards, 2008). Words with negative connotations such as "drop" established the placement in the category. Many school supporters agree that national, state, and local politicians often describe schools as "failing" (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Carr, 2010; Kohn, 2000a; Rothstein, 1998; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Vollmer, 2010). To substantiate whether schools are presented in a negative light as the experts claim, the content analysis needed to include a look at tone.

For tone on education, 141 articles were negative. A negative impression is supported by quotes, for example, from a state accountability officer saying, "We are going to have graduates on the street-typical average children-who can't hold a decent job" (Associated Press, 1994e, para. 10). Other stories included words like "drop," "decrease," or "went down" in their coverage. "About three quarters of North Carolina's

schools met state goals for improvement on end-of-year tests in 2003-2004, down about 20 percentage points from the year before, according to final results released yesterday” (Cribbs, 2004, para. 1). Some centered on parents wanting to avoid schools that were considered low performing (Helms, 2004f). Other stories considered negative about education focused on tension. For example, a story titled “Black colleges adapt-Influx of Whites worries some” centered on traditionally Black colleges having low test scores and the pressure to admit and educate more White students (Brooks, 1994a). A tone of tension was abundant in a story about rolling back the Common Core standards with a state lawmaker saying, “This bill puts education back where the Constitution says it belongs—in the hands of North Carolina” (Stancill, 2014a, para. 4). Further examples of negativity about education dealt with underfunding for education from the state (Wellington, 1994) and censorship (Kauffman, 1994a).

There were fewer stories reflecting positive impressions of public education (Table 2) with 86 in the count. One such story remarked on the progress of schools since the U.S. Supreme Court decision in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case (Banov, 2004c) but said the “struggle for equal education is incomplete” (para. 1). Another included a profile of a new superintendent crediting her with turning around a district (Wagner, 2004d). Highlighting the achievements of a private school was included in a story about a literary contest (Creager, 2014). One positive story about education discussed how increased funding allowed for smaller class sizes (Wrinn, 2004a). The smaller classes were credited for better test scores (Wrinn, 2004a). A story on accountability stressed the decline in dropouts while adding statistics make the dropout rate hard to calculate (Helms, 2004j). One editorial about the Common Core, a set of standards, presented a positive view on the direction of education but criticized state

lawmakers for considering throwing out Common Core and adopting a new curriculum. Editorialists wrote, “These days the General Assembly is not exactly the location of thoughtful debate and compromise” (“Moving on,” 2014, para. 7).

Lastly, nearly 73 stories in the study were neither positive nor negative about education. A story discussing test quality for North Carolina schools was neutral on education but narrated state lawmakers’ opposition to tests from a group called Smarter Balance, which grew out of the passage of Common Core (Bonner, 2014). Testing was the focus of another story considered neutral as it discussed revised scoring for the SAT (Associated Press, 1994b). A couple’s donation to North Carolina State University was also neutral on education (Price, 2014). A story highlighting a transformation effort in Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools was both positive and negative, yielding a neutral rating. It spoke of increased graduation rates but lower test scores (Helms, 2014f).

In sum, the tone on education (Table 2) was largely negative with nearly 47% of the stories reflecting an unfavorable view of education. With conflict being an element of news, concentrating on “tension, surprise, and suspense” is to be expected in coverage of education or any issue (Ferguson et al., 2001, p. 66). However, O’Neil (2012) and Hogan (2013) found media coverage often presents schools as in “crisis” or “failing.” This researcher’s findings support O’Neil and Hogan’s conclusions that the majority of stories published placed public education in a negative light. Below is a table on tone on education for each category.

Table 2

Tone on Education

Category	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total
Accountability	15	29	6	50
Scores and testing	9	9	14	32
Curriculum, grading, and scheduling	12	17	5	34
Funding	5	11	12	28
Profile	21	1	2	24
Race	4	9	6	19
Equity	4	9	2	15
School choice	5 + 1 (1-positive about home schools and negative about public schools)	6	2	14
Election	2	6	4	12
Scandal	0	12	0	12
Students and teachers	2	8	5	15
Reassignment	1	7	1	9
Conflict	6	0	0	6
College	2	0	4	6
Miscellaneous	10	4	10	24
Total	86	141	73	300

Tone about Testing

An examination of the tone on education was necessary to give context to the tone about testing (Table 3) from each article in the study. The researcher evaluated the tone on testing since the purpose of the study was to discover how stories on test scores are presented. More stories were negative about testing than education itself with 164 stories falling into the negative testing category. A story was categorized as negative about testing if the focus was on decreases in scores or if a character in the article was critical of the tests. Stories with headlines such as “High Schools Get Bad Report Card” were sure to fall in the negative category (Varela, 1994e). One report was rated negative because it quoted teachers saying testing has “more to do with politics than education” (Varela, 1994h, para. 4). Some articles spoke of modest increases, saying scores remained low “because students come from poor families who seldom stress education,” according to an associate district superintendent (Gorman, 1994, para. 15). These stories were negative about testing or focused on a lack of growth in scores.

On the positive side, 87 stories spoke about increased scores or innovative ways to improve scores. For example, a story about block scheduling in high school outlined how an increase in scores could be attributed to the schedule change (Walker, 1994a). One article detailed how students pretended to be crime scene investigators to improve science skills (Hagerman, 2014). Another spoke of how schooling has changed for the better since the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision (Banov, 2004c).

Lastly for the tone on testing, 49 articles remained neutral. A story about changes to SAT testing explained how scoring was to be revised (Associated Press, 1994b). Another spoke of the top-ranked colleges for the money (“Academic Achievers,” 1994). A different story talked about adding gifted classes to reach more students but was

neutral on testing (Varela, 1994c).

As with the tone on education, the overriding tone about testing (Table 3) was negative. The two evaluations taken as a whole showed news writers accented the harmful aspects in education and testing. Hogan (2013) speculated that negative articles “contribute to an impression of pessimism about public education” (p. 63). The trial coder who worked with the lead researcher remarked that even when the stories were about score increases, the writers emphasized the places where student performance had not improved.

Below is a table of the tone on testing for each category.

Table 3

Tone on Testing

Category	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total
Accountability	10	38	2	50
Scores and testing	9	13	10	32
Curriculum, grading, and scheduling	11	17	6	34
Funding	12	15	1	28
Profile	14	4	6	24
Race	3	13	3	19
Equity	3	10	2	15
School choice	5	6	3	14
Election	3	8	1	12
Scandal	1	10	1	12
Students and teachers	2	9	4	15
Reassignment	2	6	1	9
Conflict	3	2	1	6
College	1	1	4	6
Miscellaneous	13	8	3	24
Total	92	160	48	300

Type of Test

The news articles were less specific about what type of tests when publishing

reports on scores, funding, curriculum, or other matters. In 168 of the articles, tests were mentioned in general. Sometimes, the articles mentioned more than one test. It can be deduced that if the article is about public schools, the majority of tests referenced in stories are the EOG and EOC, exams mandated in North Carolina, given to either elementary and middle-grade students or to high schoolers (NCDPI, 2012a). In 52 of the articles, the story specifically referenced EOG. Thirty-five times the EOC was explicitly referenced.

The SAT is a test potential college and university students take for possible admission to higher education schools (Chappell, 1994a). Fifty-six articles specifically mentioned the SAT. The SAT has long been used as a measure of how schools and students are doing with their studies, a “barometer” as one article called it (Kauffman, 1994b). However, the test is supposed to be a predictor of potential college success for a student (Chappell, 1994a; Rothstein, 1998; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Wrinn, 2004b), not a measure of that student’s learning or intelligence. As Rothstein (1998) argued, “The SAT is the worst possible test by which to evaluate the performance of American schools because it is voluntary” (p. 53).

It is important to draw attention to the purpose of the SAT because even in reporting results, news writers did not seem sure how to handle the scores. One article quoted a state department of instruction official, saying, “It’s not the most valid indicator of student achievement, but it’s the measure the public likes to have reported” (Gorman, 1994, para. 12). Another report said the College Board, the company that makes the SAT, “cautions against using SAT as a gauge of overall state education performance” (Banov, 2004b, para. 8). The article indicated the average SAT score fluctuates depending on how many students take the test (Banov, 2004b). A *Winston-Salem*

Journal story reported a one-point increase for North Carolina students but was unclear on what an increase or decrease might mean.

Educators and the makers of the SAT discourage the use of SAT scores to compare schools, school systems, or states. But as the only national tests given to large numbers of high-school students, it often gets used to do just that. (Varela, 1994c, para. 11)

An editorial published shortly after the August Winston-Salem 1994 article questioned the use of the SAT as a measure, saying, “better preparation for the SAT should not be confused with better education” (“The next step,” 1994, para. 5). A similar editorial advised to view SAT scores with a “few grains of salt,” and reminded readers the “SATs are not designed to as comparative measures of school systems” (“SAT salt,” 2004, para. 1, para. 4).

A front-page story focused on the SAT score of a young woman who was home-schooled and had spent a year off from school to be a missionary. The report said she earned a 1,340 on the SAT, the 95th percentile in the country (Abramson, 1994b). Another story about the SAT told how the test was to include a writing portion for new test takers (Sutton, 2004).

Some SAT stories focused on scandal. One report on what appeared to be tampering with answer sheets said “more than 100 erasure marks were found on some of the tests” (Weeks, 1994a, para. 8). Another controversial story centered on whether a superintendent had schools offer students state money to not take the test. A teacher said she did not trust the superintendent and was quoted anonymously saying, “Test scores are up, but I’m not convinced that that encourages better teaching” (Wagner, 2004b, para. 17). At least four stories in the sample were associated with the SAT and superintendent

testing scandal (Oliver, 2004; “Unnecessary Test,” 2004, Wagner, 2004c, 2004d). In sum, it seemed the papers over-reported SAT scores considering that there is no academic consensus that the test measures what is taught and learned in schools (Banov, 2004b; Chappell, 1994a; Kauffman, 1994b; Wagner, 2004b, Wrinn, 2004b).

Other tests mentioned in 22 articles include high school comprehensive tests; general admission tests; ACT, administered by the American College Testing Program; writing tests, the “Iowa” test, also known as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills for kindergarten through twelfth-grade students; the SATA, the Scholastic Ability Test for Adults; AIG, Academically or Intellectually Gifted; science tests; AP, Advanced Placement; competency tests for high school seniors; Praxis, a test for teacher certification; CAT, California Achievement Test; and PSAT, Preliminary SATs (Brooks, 1994b; Coleman, 1994; Hasty, 1994; Herron, 2014a; Kane, 2014a; “Making the grade,” 2004; Moss, 1994; Pope, 2004; “Scoring the test,” 2004; Varela, 1994e, 1994g; Walker, 2004). Only one article discussed teacher-made tests (Dunn, 2014b).

Dates

The articles examined were fairly evenly distributed across the months of the year. August produced the most articles among the 3 years with a total of 41 articles. August is, of course, the month that most public school students go back to class. The next most common month for articles was September with 32 articles total. Table 4 below shows the breakdown of articles per month with July having the fewest.

Table 4

Number of Articles per Month

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
January	30	10.0	10.0
February	25	0.0833	18.33
March	21	0.07	25.33
April	19	0.0633	31.66
May	27	0.09	40.66
June	25	0.0833	49.00
July	17	0.0566	54.66
August	41	0.1366	68.33
September	32	0.1066	79.00
October	26	0.0866	87.66
November	19	0.0633	94.00
December	18	0.06	100.0
Total	300	100.0	

By far, when looking at the count based on the year published, the most stories were recorded in 2004 with more than 42% of the articles in the examination for this study published in that year (Table 5). That might have been predicted because it is the first year in the study after the passage of the federal NCLB, which placed an emphasis on test scores (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). One critic said, “NCLB is what set the testing frenzy of the United States in motion” (Reddell, 2010, p. 6). In particular, *The Charlotte Observer* printed 67 articles that year, more than 22% of the total sample, with the words “test scores” in them. Also of note, the farther the news cycle from the passage of NCLB, the fewer the news stories were published that included the words “test scores.” In fact, for the sample years of 1994, 2004, and 2014, the total fewest articles were published in 2014. Table 5 shows of the number of articles by year published.

Table 5

Number of Articles per Year

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
1994	96	32	32
2004	127	42.33	74.33
2014	77	25.66	100.0
Total	300	100.0	

Sources

The researcher also made note of who was quoted in the stories to determine the sources. As journalist experts would advise, “Direct observation and background research are essential; sources’ comments provide perspective, and their exact words give the newspaper life” (Smith, 1991, p. 59). As far as the groups of people most often quoted as sources, district administrators led the count in this exploration. Among others, superintendents, associate superintendents, the director of elementary education, or a school system spokesperson are some of the voices that represented the district in 152 articles. At times, the district administrator, or any source, may have been quoted more than once in the article. Coders did not mark each occurrence. The next most often quoted source was a catch-all category. “Interested citizen” included lawyers, union representatives, business leaders, researchers, university professors, and more. In the articles, quotes from those sources who could be called “other” appeared 133 times. The next most cited group of people in the news stories were parents with 66 occurrences. Principals and state administrators, such as the state school board superintendent or testing coordinator, were quoted 62 and 63 times, respectively. Local elected leaders, either local school board members or county commissioners, were quoted in 49 articles.

State lawmakers appeared in 44 articles. Lastly, teachers were quoted in 41 articles and students in 31.

Of note, district administrators were quoted in the stories more often than principals, teachers, and students combined. Yet non-educators, most of whom had no professional credentials, were quoted nearly as often as those who working within the school systems.

Analysis of Categories

The purpose of this research was to determine the patterns and themes in four North Carolina newspapers in reporting on “test scores.” The discussion is a descriptive exploration of the concepts embedded in the articles. But as Kondracki et al. (2002) argued, the latent content also provided an interesting examination of the stories. A more complete description of the categories illuminates the latent content. For analysis of the categories and the latent content, the researcher considered the article’s topic, the tone about education, the tone about testing, rhetorical devices used, sources quoted in the article, page number, and word count.

Accountability

In the analysis of categories, accountability was a dominant theme with 50 articles. Accountability was mentioned in stories with details on whether students, schools, and districts met proficiency standards as determined by the state of North Carolina. In 16 of the articles, the federal law known as NCLB was cited. In 11 of the articles, the ABCs of education, a North Carolina accountability initiative, was cited (Dunn, 2014e; Helms, 2004j). Some articles mentioned both measures. Other accountability measures included the high school competency test, state report cards, and the Ready Assessment for Common Core standards. Further, accountability was the

focus of stories about Read to Achieve, the North Carolina initiative to have all third graders reading on grade level by the end of the school year. Some stories mentioned how schools that did not make the expected mark were placed in a warning category and labeled “low-performing schools” (Abramson, 1994a; Dunn & Lyttle, 2014; Herron, 2014c; “Making the grade,” 2004; Varela 1994e). Other stories spoke of “expected growth,” testing benchmarks, rating systems, and teacher evaluations (O’Brien & Lyttle, 1994; “Scores,” 2014; Silberman, 1994; Smolowitz, 2004c). Each of these stories demonstrated accountability language in the discussion. The accountability stories, as a whole, looked at test scores from a perspective of blame for why scores did not meet expectations; or, at times, accountability pieces sought to explain the reasons schools and districts did not make expected growth by detailing how racial or socioeconomic disparities affected scores.

Oftentimes, the accountability story seemed to leave school personnel or parents on the defensive. A Durham school administrator spoke of the gains on federal goals but said, “About 10 of those school missed the AYP by one of two goals” (Hannah-Jones, 2004c, para. 11). He continued, “That doesn’t mean the school is failing in my mind” (Hannah-Jones, 2004c, para. 11). A superintendent from Orange County was critical of the proficiency standards and said the district would need to perform their own test analysis to plan next steps. “It seems that while it’s an improvement over the old report card, it’s probably more valuable to people in Raleigh and politicians who don’t have to figure how to bring up mastery levels” (Kauffman, 1994c, para. 10). One article cited a parent describing how scores lead to perceptions about education. “No one wants their school to be perceived as a low-performing school. No one wants to say ‘I graduated from a low-performing school’” (Banov, 2004d, para. 9).

While some articles seemed to put school personnel on the defensive; others seemed to put state personnel on the attack. A Winston-Salem article quoted a state board of education member expressing what the report called her outrage. “If we have school systems where year after year 85 percent of their students are not performing and we allow that system to continue to exist, then we’re derelict in our duty” (Varela, 1994e, para. 4). Similar words from a state board member came in an editorial who quoted the member, saying, “This is the only industry I know of where there is no penalty for inadequate performance” (“A’s and B’s only,” 1994, para. 6).

Another article talked about how scores were up but spent a good deal of space on the grade levels that were not making the mark (Silberman, 1994). One provision of NCLB allowed parents to choose a new school if their child’s home school did not reach achievement goals (Hui, 2004c). One article highlighted the pressure schools face of possibly losing students and the pressure parents feel to pick a new school (Hui, 2004c). Similarly, articles outlined how schools could be high performing but still miss state or federal measures because not all groups, such as minority or second-language learners, made the targets (Maguire, 2004). Some focused on the disparities between the groups despite improving scores (Varela, 1994b).

Two editorials spoke positively of the accountability efforts. Both credited improving scores on accountability itself saying a closer eye on results had led to progress. The positive results “affirm the wisdom of an intensive emphasis on reading” (“Durham’s soaring,” 2004, para. 5). The second credited accountability with improvements, saying the former North Carolina governors’ and General Assembly’s efforts had “played a role” (“An education payoff,” 2004, para. 2). A third opinion piece praised improvements but said the state had lowered expectations for passing scores.

“We’re glad so many succeeded, but not failing isn’t excelling” (“Scores,” 2014, para. 3).

Another piece in the opinion section approached accountability from a judicial standpoint indicating that the state was “failing to educate its children” (Johnston, 2014, para. 1). The writer summarized a report by Judge Howard Manning who blamed principals and teachers for not individualizing instruction and making sure education is rigorous for all students. Judge Manning issued the decision in the well-known Leandro court case, which dealt with equitable funding for North Carolina schools (Associated Press, 1994a). The opinion piece went on to blame funding for cuts in teachers, textbooks, and staff development. It concluded with a bit of a defense for school personnel, saying, “The judge and the teachers may live in different worlds” (Johnston, 2014, para. 4).

Another opinion piece was critical about a lack of growth on state test scores and related how teacher bonuses are tied to scores (“Continued progress,” 2004). While the editorial celebrated that 94% of students in Chapel Hill-Carrboro schools tested proficient, fewer schools achieved high growth, meaning teachers would get a bonus of \$750 instead of \$1,500 (“Continued progress,” 2004). As a whole, the commentary called results “encouraging” (“Continued progress,” 2004, para. 11). Related to the editorial about teacher bonuses was an article dealing with accusations of flawed scoring measures of student performance. In particular, an error in middle school measures was suspected (Silberman, 2004c). The interim state school superintendent said the state school board would revisit the scores because she wanted to “keep the confidence of everyone involved” and wanted the scoring to be fair (Silberman, 2004a, para. 4).

One article tackled accountability for charter schools with a focus on a charter the state planned to shut down. The school had reportedly not tested enough of the students.

Testing 95% or more of students was part of NCLB requirements (Alexander, 2014b).

The school was appealing the closure. “We’re not hiding behind our students with disabilities,” the principal said. “It’s the one-size fits all testing that does not work for a lot of students” (Alexander, 2014b, para. 10).

Taken as a whole, the accountability category presented a negative view of testing either due to lower than expected results or through criticisms of testing itself. Twenty-nine of the 50 articles were negative about education, and 38 were negative about testing. The topic had 15 articles on education with a positive perspective, and 10 were positive about testing. Only six stories with a theme of accountability were neutral on education, and two were neutral about testing. Taken as a whole, the category seemed to direct blame to the tests, the teachers, and accountability laws themselves for score results and public perceptions.

Scores and Testing

The next category, “Scores and testing,” represents more than a tenth of the total articles with a count of 32. “Scores and testing” focused more on changes for the test; test preparation; and conditions for student, school, or district improvement (Bierer, 2014a, 2014b; Smolowitz, 2004d; Wrinn, 2004b). For some articles, the reporting was straightforward, such as changes allowing calculators (Associated Press, 1994b). Other articles celebrated increases in scores and in the number of students taking the test (Varela, 1994c). Some testing preparation stories explained how students were anxious to test (Walker, 1994b).

Several stories dealt with the idea of rigor. A story on one school’s outscoring other high schools on the SAT talked of improving class rigor and teacher training to get improved scores district-wide (Chappell, 1994a). Another dealt with the idea of rigor,

saying the SAT would include a writing portion because colleges complained students wrote poorly (Smolowitz, 2004d). A similar article about the addition of a writing section explained that many colleges already require a writing sample for admission (Sutton, 2004). One spoke of the political controversy of moving toward tests designed for the Common Core (Bonner, 2014). The proposed tests cost more than the traditional standardized tests given in North Carolina, but Common Core supporters believe the new tests to be more rigorous and therefore a better measure of learning (Bonner, 2014).

One story reported that one fifth of third-grade students were already proficient in reading when they entered the third grade (Helms, 2014a). The writer said those students “don’t have to worry” about being retained as part of the state’s Read to Achieve law, which mandates proficiency in third-grade reading (Helms, 2014a, para. 1). Some criticized the idea of promotion or retention based on a single test, saying it is “wrong and unjustified” (Associated Press, 1994d, para. 12).

“Wrong” is what one opinion piece called a testing formula used for score reports (“Flawed grading,” 2004). State leaders suspected a mix up in the formulas when only two middle schools in the state qualified for bonuses based on 2004 results. The editorialists wrote, “the flawed formula had much the same effect as a referee who blows a key call late in a game. It’s enough to turn winners into losers” (“Flawed grading,” 2004, para. 5).

A district superintendent said test score reports gave a “clearer picture” of where the district needed to improve (Woodruff, 1994, para. 5), but he added the 24% proficiency on all tests could improve “if changes in the curriculum and teaching methods were met with less opposition from teachers and parents” (Woodruff, 1994, para. 14).

Instead of blaming teachers and parents, one story blamed testing for poor learning in schools (Varela, 1994h). The article quoted teacher concerns that testing was overkill and has “more to do with politics than education” (Varela, 1994h, para. 7).

One story celebrated the high test scores among home school students which placed them in the top 25% of nationwide achievement tests (Associated Press, 1994f). Just days later, an editorial in the same paper blasted the report on home school scores with the headline, “Of course scores are higher” (“Of course,” 1994). The editorial writers said, “The only wonder is that such a select group isn’t doing even better” (“Of course,” 1994, para. 1). Editorialists pointed out a higher percentage of home school students have parents who are involved with their education and who have a college degree than most students (“Of course,” 1994).

Nine stories in the “Scores and testing” category were positive about education, nine were negative, and 14 were neutral. On the issue of testing, nine were positive, 13 were negative, and 10 were neutral. As a whole, the “Scores and testing” news stories appeared to be less negative than the accountability pieces and were focused more on presenting test results. Still, the stories often lacked a deep analysis of what the scores might mean.

Curriculum, Grading, and Scheduling

Thirty-four stories fell into the category of “Curriculum, grading, and scheduling.” While the state sets curriculum and the general calendar for North Carolina schools, these stories developed as a unique category because each deals with what happens during the school day. Schools are responsible for the delivery of curriculum, teachers for grading, and administrators for creating schedules.

Some of the stories dealt with student grades; others were about remediation for

struggling students (Associated Press, 2004b; Smith, 2004). One story about grades questioned whether honors classes and grading were inflated compared to grading around the country. “Yet more students in North Carolina report grade averages in the ‘A’ range than in the nation as a whole and than in most other states with high percentages of SAT test-takers” (Associated Press, 2004b, para. 10). A story about remediation was solution-oriented, explaining how rising ninth graders who missed state testing goals were placed in a “transition” program. The writer quoted a district administrator saying, “This is not punitive – it’s understanding how serious it is and doing something directly about the kids who need this so desperately” (Smith, 2004, para. 5).

Other stories dealt with the political aspects of curriculum as some state lawmakers planned to eliminate the Common Core State Standards. Common Core supporters called the dismantling plan “political theater” (Stancill, 2014a, para. 5). Another article pointed out the irony that the new standards were backed by the business community, which also typically supports Republicans in the General Assembly, and the same lawmakers were pushing to eliminate the standards (Pritchard & Wolverton, 2014). One article did not mention Common Core but criticized the exploratory nature of a math program in Wake County Schools (Silberman, 2004b). Supporters argued that the math program helped students know how to apply facts; but critics said, “You’ve got thousands of kids who are at risk because of this experiment” (Silberman, 2004b, para. 8).

Politicians also questioned the readiness of students in a story comparing proficiency on state tests to graduation rates (Alexander, 2014c). The testing director for the district countered by questioning whether state tests are a better measure of the student’s performance than local grades (Alexander, 2014c). The story wrapped up with information from the conservative John Locke Foundation which called it a “disturbing

trend” that graduates had to take remedial classes in college (Alexander, 2014c, para. 20).

One story questioned block scheduling, a plan where students can take eight semester-long classes instead of six year-long courses in high school (Hannah-Jones, 2004b). Parents objected to the change to block scheduling without their input. One said, “I feel like a truck ran over me” (Hannah-Jones, 2004b, para. 14). In another district, parents questioned plans to move towards year-round schools (Shaffer, 2004). The writer said anyone proposing year-round “needed to duck and cover, preferably with a helmet” (Shaffer, 2004, para. 1).

Other stories touted the benefits of reading (Simmons, 2004c) and music (Keuffel, 2004). One speculated English scores for second-language learners would be better if those students were also taught Spanish (Hannah-Jones, 2004e).

As a group, the curriculum, grading, and scheduling category was not as negative about education or testing as the accountability or scores and testing categories. Twelve stories were positive about education, while 11 were positive about testing. Seventeen stories were negative about education, and 17 were negative about testing. Five curriculum stories were impartial about education, and six were neutral on testing.

Funding

The debate over funding for schools and programs provided some of the liveliest discourse in all the articles. Twenty-eight stories dealt directly with funding, either from state or local sources. In several, the battle over increasing taxes to support schools took center stage (Helms, 2004i). A commissioner said it was time to “step up to the plate” and give schools what they needed when the district’s request represented a 9% increase (Helms, 2004i, para. 26). Editorial writers supported the extra \$25 million, writing that “Too many students continue to lag academically” (“Meeting school,” 2004, para. 4).

Later, when county commissioners denied the funding request, one school board member blasted the commission's decision. "If the community is satisfied with educating about 75% of our children, we can do that with the money we've got" (Helms, 2004e, para. 19)

One story detailed a work session that included county commissioners and school system leaders (Wireman, 1994b). School leaders said they needed nearly \$28 million dollars, while county leaders would only promise \$19 million. One commissioner described the decision to hold funding where it was as "no picnic," adding that "there's a lot of people in the county who just don't want their taxes raised" (Wireman, 1994b, para. 7). The article credited the locally elected leaders with having a civil discussion about funding.

Civility was in short supply in a story quoting the state's education superintendent's speech on funding (Wellington, 1994). Bob Etheridge said while the state should be celebrating an increase in test scores, "we find ourselves fighting to get across to the people our funding needs and our schools' funding needs" (Wellington, 1994, para. 5). Speaking indirectly to state Senators, the state schools superintendent said the public schools deserved more (Wellington, 1994).

Legislators seemed receptive to budget increases in another story. They showed support for afterschool programs, saying, "We don't need to be funneling children into our juvenile justice system" (Winn, 2004b, para. 14). The article continued that budget requests were even more urgent in light of mandates from NCLB, which ultimately expected proficiency from every student (Winn, 2004b).

One story tackled the idea that spending more does not necessarily provide better test results (Hannah-Jones, 2004d). Durham County schools had high per pupil spending compared to the rest of the state. A school board member defended the spending, saying,

“I think there’s a difference between rural poor and urban poor” (Hannah-Jones, 2004d, para. 11). Still another story on spending and poll results said that residents would support increased taxes for more funding in Wake County schools (Hui, 2004d)

Among the entire study, the 28 articles about funding may have been one of the most negative categories. Only five were positive about education, while 12 were positive about testing. Eleven were negative about education, and 15 were negative about testing. Twelve were neutral on education, and only one was neutral on testing.

Profile

For the purpose of this study, profile stories are those that feature a person or in one instance, a place. Profile stories are sometimes called “evergreen” because they can be published 1 week versus the next week (Ferguson et al., 2001). At times, the story may provide a backdrop for a developing or continuing story (Ferguson et al., 2001). Such is the case for the 24 stories categorized as profiles in this study.

Several profile stories celebrated teachers, principals, and superintendents (Achenbaum, 2004d; Dunn, 2014c; Helms, 2004h). One story explained how a principal allowed students to stretch core courses like English, algebra, and biology into year-long classes, with the students getting elective credits the first semester (Helms, 2004h). The change was credited with increasing proficiency rates in 3 years from 52% to 82%. The principal explained her drive. “I refuse for anyone to tell me we had to be below average. I’ve never been a loser in my life” (Helms, 2004h, para. 23). Another principal was credited with turning around a school during the recession (Dunn, 2014c). Coworkers said of her, “It’s a joy to come to work every day. I don’t know that at most places you can say that you look forward to going to work and you look forward to seeing your boss” (Dunn, 2014c, para. 16).

One story highlighted the changes made by a new superintendent after a tumultuous tenure by her predecessor (Wagner, 2004d). Business leaders, school board members, and teachers said she had done much in her 6-month tenure to change perceptions of the district and called her “genuine” (Wagner, 2004d, para. 6).

A university president looked back on his legacy and in doing so weighed in on standardized testing. “I really think that they measure what you’ve learned. The problem is that they cannot measure your intelligence” (Perlmott, 1994, para. 31). The president also said that he hoped the university continued to hold high testing expectations for athletes and academics should be first priority. “I don’t think athletics should wag the tail of the dog. When I came to Johnson C. Smith, we were spending too much money on athletics and the academic programs were suffering” (Perlmott, 1994, para. 12).

Few of the profile stories featured students (Associated Press, 1994c; Wilkerson-New, 2014). One spoke of a student who was an Eagle Scout, a top runner, and had earned top grades (Wilkerson-New, 2014). Another told of twins who had both been awarded scholarships for N.C. State (Associated Press, 1994c).

Finally, an unusual profile featured a school on its 75th anniversary (Hui, 2004b). The article chronicled the school’s status through the Great Depression and through war. It held that the school had slipped in status a bit in the last few years but added, “Broughton has received numerous awards and national recognition. Its rigorous International Baccalaureate program is lauded for its quality education and above-average test scores” (Hui, 2004b, para. 16).

By definition, the profile stories are less substantive than hard news (Ferguson et al., 2001). It might be expected that the tone about education and testing in these stories would be more upbeat. In fact, 21 of 24 were positive about education, and 14 were

positive about testing. Only one article was negative about education. The particular one that was negative about education relayed details on a new administrator for a district that administrators said was in need of reform. The article also declared the district had suffered from lots of turnover (Thompson, 1994). Four articles deemed to be profiles were negative about testing. Two of the profile articles were in the middle on education, and six were neutral on testing.

Race

The next category with 19 articles was race. Many of these focused on disparities in scores (Achenbaum, 2004c). One superintendent of a high-performing district blamed student attitudes for the scoring gap saying that some students had come to believe, “I’m not as smart as those kids. So now your mindset is, ‘I can’t do it’” (Alexander, 2014a, para. 9).

Another story about race took a different angle. It explained how parents did not want to use race or poverty as an excuse for low student performance (Simmons, 2004b). The Parent Teacher Association set goals to improve parental involvement and encourage minority students to take more challenging courses (Simmons, 2004b). An opinion piece challenged people to get involved in schools and said, “White flight,” a term used to describe White families moving away from urban districts, was due to “plain, old-fashioned racism” (Saunders, 2004, para. 12, 13).

Other stories honored certain individuals for their contributions to breaking down racial barriers. One celebrated the U.S. District Court judge who ordered Charlotte students be bused to achieve a racial balance in schools (Neff, 1994). Initially Judge McMillan opposed busing, saying, “May we ever be saved from the folly”; but after hearing the case, he ordered busing as he said he “listened and learned” (Neff, 1994, para.

15, para. 17).

A 1994 article offered a retrospective since the Supreme Court decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education*, an order to desegregate schools (Ford, 1994). The opinion writer cited young Black women headed to college who said they could not succumb to peer pressure to settle for less than their dreams. One college student declared, “People come and go. You can’t allow other people’s opinions to dictate what you want out of life” (Ford, 1994, para. 6). Another Black student shared a similar thought: “Don’t let peers discourage you from doing well” (Ford, 1994, para. 7).

Still other articles looked at historically Black colleges and their mission (Brooks, 1994a; Stancill, 2014c). One article discussed how Asian students had the highest SAT scores in the county that year (Hui, 2004a).

Collectively, four of the stories under the subheading of race were positive about education, while three were positive about testing. Nine stories were negative about education, and 13 were negative about testing. Six stories were rated neutral on education; three were neutral on testing.

Equity

Sometimes the topic of equity deals with race; but in the case of this study, those 15 stories were about offering equal opportunities regardless of student race. In one story Judge Howard Manning, the judge in a landmark school quality case, pronounced that North Carolina had a “reading problem” (Stancill, 2014b, para. 4). Manning urged teachers to conduct checkups of student reading abilities and then adjust their instruction based on the checkups (Stancill, 2014b). He said the state had no right to “cut and run” from higher standards to try to “cover up the results of their failure to provide that [equal] opportunity” (Stancill, 2014b, para. 6).

In another story about equity, one superintendent focused on equal opportunities by talking about reducing teacher turnover and focusing on literacy: “We will be great when all children are successful and no child left behind is a reality, not political rhetoric” (Banov, 2004c, para. 7). Another story with similar themes suggested closing teacher transfers to “steer experienced teachers to schools that need them the most” (Helms, 2004c, para. 1).

At least four stories talked about offering more magnet programs or classes for gifted students (Chappell, 1994c; Herron, 2014b; Hui, 2014b, 2014c). One story on gifted education questioned why so many affluent students are placed in academically gifted classes while lower-income students are not. A district administrator said, “Sometimes these kids just don’t show their particular level of knowledge on standardized tests. Because they don’t meet the criteria doesn’t mean they’re not smart” (Chappell, 1994c, para. 10).

One editorial chided the state legislature on equity. The writer stated the state had agreed to give funding in a long-range plan but had not done so (Stinneford, 1994a). In the editorial called “He who gives the gold rules,” the writer said the legislature might wait on the legal system to sort out the amount of money schools should get (Stinneford, 1994a). The editorial was referencing the Leandro lawsuit, a school quality lawsuit filed on behalf of poor counties (Stinneford, 1994a). The editorialists implied that the legislature holds the funds, so the general assembly could make the rules; hence, the editorialists developed the title “He who gives the gold rules” (Stinneford, 1994a).

In another story, the key speaker recalled how far the schools had come since the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, a U.S. Supreme Court order to desegregate schools. He said, “In the spirit of that decision, it is now time to take public education to

a higher level” (Banov, 2004c, para. 3).

As a rule, the stories on equity did not offer an upbeat feeling on education or testing. Of the 15, four were positive on education, and three were encouraging on testing. Nine of the articles were pessimistic about education and 10 were on testing. Lastly, two articles were neutral on education, and two were neutral on testing.

School Choice

Private, home, charter, and magnet schools were the topics of 14 stories categorized by the researcher as “school choice” stories. The magnet school stories were different from those that appeared in the equity category; these were about offering parents options to public schools. Economist Milton Friedman (1962) is credited with the choice movement from his writing in the 1960s. He argued parents should be allowed to have a voice in how their money is spent on education (Friedman, 1962). The economist believed the “market,” or competition, could improve public schools (Friedman, 1962). Tyack and Cuban (1995) argued the use of words like “market,” “customers,” and “payout” evolve from business-oriented reformers of public education (p. 112). The “market” of schooling was evident in one story as the principal talked about a need for the staff to establish “their brand” (Smolowitz, 2004a, para. 11). Of the entire “school choice” group, the majority of stories were about charters, followed by stories about private schools.

One editorial looked at the performance for charter students saying they performed worse than public school students on math and reading (“Assessing charter,” 2004). The report was based on national scores but added that North Carolina charter students who were White and Black had lagged behind their public school peers in another performance audit from three years ago (“Assessing charter,” 2004).

The director at one charter school advised parents to know each school's performance as they considered choice options. "Some people hear the word 'charter' and think, 'Oh, better,' That's a mistake" (Helms, 2014g, para. 9). The charter director added, "Every charter is different. Research and know what you're signing up for" (Helms, 2014g, para. 9). The same article brought up some of the criticisms of charter schools from a mom who drove her son 30 minutes every day to attend a charter. The mother said, "I think charter schools are a really good idea. But it's going to increase the divide between the have and have-nots" (Helms, 2014g, para. 44).

One story said nationally recognized charters serve mostly low-income students but this school's mission was to "end generational poverty" (Helms, 2014b, para. 4). The story said the school wanted to teach students how to go to college and make a living that would support their family and a middle-class lifestyle (Helms, 2014b).

Another charter focused on younger-aged students and "the basics" by trying to keep class sizes low and placing a teaching assistant in each class (O'Gorman, 2014).

Two stories dealt with the profit motive and public funding for charters. One story criticized a businessman who ran a chain of charter schools because he also sold or leased the schools' buildings, land, desks, computers, and training for teachers (Wang, 2014). The businessman also owned the management company that handled the day-to-day operations of the schools (Wang, 2014). The report said during 6 years, the businessman took in \$20 million for two of his schools. At the heart of the story was what the writer claimed was a lack of checks and balances in North Carolina for monitoring and auditing of charter schools. The businessman rebuffed such monitoring. He complained that North Carolina would eventually over-regulate charters and take away the "freedom" of those who chose to operate and attend them (Wang, 2014, para.

23).

The other story dealing with funding detailed how charter leaders resisted disclosing employee pay (Helms, 2014h). Public school salaries are required to be released by law (Helms, 2014h). The article said some charter operators did not believe the law applied to them because they operate as a quasi-public entity (Helms, 2014h).

Criticism of public schools was central to one story about parents pulling their students out and placing them in private schools. The parents did not feel their gifted children were being challenged (Winn, 2004c). One mom detailed her daughter being forced to do mundane work repeatedly while the teacher tried to see that everyone else understood the lesson. “We got so tired of fighting as if we were asking for something that’s an elitist thing to ask for, that our child not be excruciatingly bored” (Winn, 2004c, para. 24).

One school choice story explained how an ex-headmaster planned to open a new private school in the same city (Brooks, 1994b). He left his former post after what he called “philosophical differences,” and the article reported he was taking some former students with him (Brooks, 1994b, para. 6).

One of the most colorful stories, an editorial, about private schools blasted the idea of vouchers to help with tuition costs (“Vouchers fail,” 1994). The editorial said some state lawmakers were intent on getting vouchers passed in North Carolina despite evidence from other states that students did not earn better test scores at private schools (“Vouchers fail,” 1994). It also criticized the lack of accountability when a private school closed leaving students with no school to attend (“Vouchers fail, 1994). Most forcefully, the editorial said vouchers did not help the needy, citing a national study:

Vouchers are public assistance for those who need it least. The Carnegie study

showed that those most likely to take the money and run are well-paid, well-educated parents who see a chance to get their kids into private schools at a cut-rate price. (“Vouchers fail,” 1994, para. 4)

Finally, in the category of school choice, one article highlighted the good test scores for home school students (Simmons, 1994). Another told of a home school student who was recognized as a National Merit Scholar for her high SAT score (Abramson, 1994b).

For the tone on education in the school choice category, five stories were outright positive; one was positive about home schools and negative about public schools. On the matter of testing, five school choice stories were positive. Six stories were negative about education, and six were negative on testing. Two stories were neutral on education, and three were neutral on testing.

Election

Twelve articles in the study dealt with elections, as candidates made “test scores” a campaign issue. In an article of more than 7,200 words, candidates for the Gaston County school board explained their platform on why they were running for office (Chappell, 1994b). One said, “These layers of self-esteem, humanism, government control, new-age concepts, dumbed-down curriculum, revised history, sex education and values clarification have obliterated the true purpose of education – to produce literate adults imbued with truth” (Chappell, 1994b, para. 44). Another candidate echoed the sentiments: “All the cute, touchy, feel-good programs that are currently attached to educational reforms have nothing to do with teaching academics” (Chappell, 1994b, para. 85). When asked about the kind of superintendent needed to lead the district, one candidate said, “A person that is very knowledgeable about all the ‘fads’ and ‘reforms’

going on in education” (Chappell, 1994b, para. 106). The candidate continued saying the superintendent should be “A person willing to stress academics and eliminate all nonacademic, psychological or social experimentation or engineering programs or curriculums” (Chappell, 1994b, para. 106).

Another election for county school board quoted one candidate as saying she always had to defend the school system, so she was running for office. She said she would like to see less emphasis on test scores. “There’s so much pressure on them (students), and the people in charge of the teachers aren’t really concerned about whether the students are really learning” (Nimocks, 1994, para. 29).

One story addressed an advertisement for a sitting governor who was running for reelection and was campaigning on increases in test scores since he took office (Durhams, 2004). A similar story during the same campaign quoted a different campaign advertisement saying that the challenger had a case of “spendingitis” because he was promising raises to state employees including teachers (Griffin, 2004, para. 4).

Another story previewed the race for state school superintendent pointing out the position has “limited power” (Smolowitz, 2004b, p. 17). Six of the election stories dealt with local politics and six with state races.

Of the election stories, two were positive about education while three were positive about testing. Six were negative about education, and eight were negative on testing. Four were neutral on education, and one was neutral on testing.

Scandal

Two ideas dominated the 12 stories placed in the scandal category. One continuing narrative detailed “paper classes,” classes that did not meet and were populated by several athletes at UNC-Chapel Hill (Kane, 2014b). Five of the stories

dealt with this issue. The scandal reportedly shook the university, and an editorial writer suggested college athletes “shouldn’t even be in high school if you never learned to read, ballplayer or not” (Taylor, 2014, para. 4). One article quoted a former athlete who described UNC’s academic program as “a scam” (Kane, 2014a, para. 1).

Another topic in the scandal category detailed allegations that a superintendent used state money to indirectly discourage students from taking the SAT, the college entrance exam (Wagner, 2004b). Follow-up stories reported on the state investigation and whether the superintendent would lose his license (Wagner, 2004c).

A similar story from another eastern North Carolina school questioned several erasure marks on SAT exams and whether anyone would face consequences (Oliver, 2004).

Lastly in the scandal category, one paper published a story about a superintendent’s resignation after he was accused of misleading school board members about the costs of a building project (Dunn, 2014d). The story added that the superintendent had created a “culture of fear” by belittling coworkers in public (Dunn, 2014d, para. 3).

As might be expected, none of the stories in the scandal category were positive about education, and only one was positive about test scores. All 12 were negative about education, and 10 were negative about test scores. On testing, one was neutral.

Students and Teachers

Another category discovered in the study was labeled students and teachers with 15 stories. The category of students and teachers encompassed stories about free breakfast, mental health and motivation of students, teacher pay, teacher effectiveness, and more (Barr, 2014b; Barnett, 2014; Betts, 2004; Helms, 2004a). Only one of these

stories was an editorial. In it, the writer criticized state lawmakers, saying, “Republicans are trying to improve schools by attacking them” (Barnett, 2014, para. 2). The editorialist went on to say North Carolina was in an “educational crisis” and should pay teachers better (Barnett, 2014, para. 15).

A similar theme rang through an article about social promotion, the promotion of students based on their age not their competency (Flono, 2004). The author criticized the practice of passing students along to the next grade but cited a study that said holding students back was not effective. She concluded by calling for better teachers and more early interventions to fix education problems (Flono, 2004).

Better teachers was the topic for a superintendent who was trying to get strong principals and teachers at low-performing sites (Helms, 2004a). The district administration and school board were considering pay incentives to move veteran and nationally board certified teachers to schools with a high population of disadvantaged students (Helms, 2004a). One story looked at the quality of teachers based on a statistical model the state pays for called Educational Value-Added Assessment System or EVAAS (Helms, 2014i). While the article questioned the validity of value-added measures, it went on to report the top and bottom schools in the regions based on EVAAS (Helms, 2014i). The article provided no analysis of the student demographics at each school and no interviews of any teachers, school personnel, or anyone. “Meaningful quotes are the bedrock of this reporting” (Smith, 1991, p. 108). Typically, a news story includes some kind of quotes or paraphrases to give context to the article. This article lacked context.

One editorial looked at teacher quality from the vantage point of the tests that teachers must take to be certified in North Carolina (“Scoring the test,” 2004). The editorialist maligned what he called the lack of quality of teachers in North Carolina and

said the Praxis, a certification test, is not a good measure of quality teachers (“Scoring the test,” 2004).

For the stories about students, one suggested that free breakfast for all students would increase test scores (Barr, 2014b). The district intended a trial of what’s known as “universal breakfast” at certain schools to see if feeding students helped scores (Barr, 2014b). Students’ physical well-being was captured in a story about sleep (Karim, 2004). The article argued, based on a Minnesota study, that school should start later for high schoolers (Karim, 2004). Another story argued that schools should provide mental health services to increase test scores, reduce discipline problems, and “resolve problems” (Winn, 2004a, para. 3). A mental health agency said schools are the best place to deliver services because students can get transportation and would not miss an appointment if it were to be at school (Winn, 2004a).

Of the articles in the “Students and teachers” category, two were positive about education, and two were positive about testing. Eight were negative about education, while nine were negative about testing. Five stories were neutral on education, and four were neutral on testing.

Reassignment

A somewhat small category but one worth keeping distinct as its own is reassignment. Only nine stories fell in this group, but the sharp and volatile words used made the stories a stand-alone category. Parents were often quoted in the articles as fearful their child would get a lesser education if district lines moved (Lyttle, 1994a). “Children in the county schools are being educated at a higher level than in the city schools,” argued one parent (Lyttle, 1994a, para. 5). One father recalled moving to a particular neighborhood because of the school’s good reputation; then, he learned the

school's boundaries would change (Norwood, 1994). "The way it happened so fast is what boggled our minds. We looked at the test scores, we looked at the brochure. Then, poof, it's gone," he said (Norwood, 1994, para. 16). Similarly, a story detailed how parents had moved away from a major urban district to be in their current school. When proposals to redraw the lines came, parents said their property values would go down because the schools under the new plan were older and had poorer test scores ("New school district," 2014). In one instance, the parents filed a lawsuit to stop the redistricting plan (Bell, 2014a).

The superintendent defended schools in one redistricting story, stating, "It hurts my heart," and he continued the school in question had growth in scores even though proficiency rates remained low (Dunn, 2014e, para. 8).

One story handled the encouraging aspects of reassignment after more students were identified as gifted, and the school needed more space (Herron, 2014a). The story about space for the gifted was the only one in the reassignment category to be positive about education. Two were positive about testing. Seven of the articles about reassignment were negative on education, and six were negative about testing. One story was neutral on education, and one was impartial on testing.

Conflict

Conflict was a topic in just six stories. A key element in news is conflict (Smith, 1991). Nonetheless, the stories were categorized as "conflict" because the stories focused on a disagreement or issue without a resolution ("Unnecessary test," 2004).

One story detailed a clash between the superintendent and the community and school board after he introduced a program critics called "humanism" in schools (Chappell, 1994e). Others defended the school chief saying it would be hard and

embarrassing to conduct a search to replace him (Chappell, 1994e). Similar to the criticism about humanism, a philosophy that places an emphasis on humans rather than the divine, another story quoted parents who said a district's strategic plan "would eliminate the teaching of moral values" (Lyttle, 1994b, para. 2). The school board assured parents the district was not moving towards outcome-based education which would eliminate "graded test scores and grade levels" (Lyttle, 1994b, para. 1). Outcome-based education was described as a departure from the teaching of facts and would allow the students to move at their own pace (Lyttle, 1994b). Parents equated those changes with humanism (Lyttle, 1994b).

Another story in the conflict category detailed a principal who made students walk laps on the last day of school when the students did not wear their uniforms (Pritchard, 2014). The parents said the principal was unduly "harsh" (Pritchard, 2014, para. 11). The superintendent suggested, in general, that people are sometimes discontent after a lot of change at a particular school. In the past, the school had consistently earned low test scores but had improved while the current principal worked there. An anonymous teacher said teachers deserved credit for higher test scores at the school, not the principal (Pritchard, 2014).

Finally, a story detailed the conflict between parents and teachers who supported a superintendent's push for more digital learning and the parents who wanted more traditional teaching (Kauffman, 1994b). One superintendent critic and self-described mother of three said, "It concerns me that too many times we teach for the test" (Kauffman, 1994b, para. 25).

Not surprisingly, each of the six stories in the conflict category were negative about education and educators. Three stories in the conflict category were positive about

testing, two were negative, and one was neutral.

College

Six stories appeared in the final defined category called “college.” These mostly discussed topics of applying for college, what to look for at a college fair, organizing applications, and college costs. Four articles appeared in a special section produced in 2014 by *The Charlotte Observer* called “Countdown to College” (Bierer, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d). One humorous story outlined gimmicks students might use to get their applications noticed at competitive schools (“More than scores,” 1994). For example, one student mailed a shoe with his application and joked, “Now that he had one shoe in the door how about letting in the other?” (“More than scores,” 1994, para. 1). One story detailed two local universities given high marks for providing a quality education for the money it cost (“Academic achievers,” 1994).

These stories were mostly informational and did not take a stand on matters. Two of the college stories were positive about education, while the other four were neutral. One of the college stories was positive on testing, one was negative, and four were neutral.

Miscellaneous

Finally, including a broad array of new topics is the miscellaneous category with 24 stories. Many of these stories were either too unique to throw out of the study or had weighty issues with too much substance to eliminate. The uniqueness or substance is why the 24 stories were grouped in a catch-all category.

One story detailed a meeting between educators and majority leader and State Senator Phil Berger (Helms, 2014e). In the story, the teachers brought issues to the senator about education including pay, testing, vouchers, and tenure. Some teachers had

been arrested during summer protests, so this article made note that no teachers were arrested during the Berger meeting (Helms, 2014e). Another story with political connections detailed a poll of North Carolina residents who ranked issues important to them (Dew, 1994). Residents most often picked education as an important topic in the poll. The story quoted a state senator saying citizens believe, “I don’t like the public education system, its performance, its record, the low test scores, the way my child doesn’t seem to be learning enough” (Dew, 1994, para. 18).

Several miscellaneous stories dealt with staffing issues. For example, one spoke of the need to retain principals at schools to improve stability (Dunn 2014a). Another spoke of the importance of having strong principals to get strong test scores (Healy, 1994). A superintendent’s contract extension for \$175,000 was the focus of another story (Achenbaum, 2004b).

One editorial told of a school that was getting laptops and internet access for all students (“Computing power,” 2004). With the computers, the district hoped to improve test scores.

Another editorial called “Chasing our tails” (1994) quoted a business executive who gave schools in the south a grade of an “F.” The businessman called for school reform, saying, “We just keep running in a tight little circle, thinking we’re going somewhere but standing still, with an educational establishment that’s content with the status quo” (“Chasing our tails, 1994, para. 8).

A similar theme of reform developed in a story about President Barack Obama preparing for his 2014 State of the Union speech (Schram, 2014). Speechwriters convinced the president to put in the oration that “education funding must be declared a national security priority” (Schram, 2014, para. 4). The story read much like A Nation at

Risk from 1983 when authors said America would lose national competitiveness and status due to flailing math and science scores (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Rothstein, 1998; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

Another story focused on an area of Charlotte it said had received national praise for good test scores and schools (Bolling, 2014). The story explained the scores were part of the reason for a population boom in the area (Bolling, 2014).

For the majority of articles in the miscellaneous category, there were negative stories about education (10) and testing (13). On education, four stories were positive, and eight were positive about testing. Ten stories were neutral on education, and three were neutral on testing. The categories of the stories are found in the table below (Table 6).

Table 6

Categories of Stories

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Accountability	50	16.67	16.67
Scores and testing	32	10.66	27.33
Curriculum, grading, and scheduling	34	11.33	38.66
Funding	28	9.33	47.99
Profile	24	8.00	55.99
Race	19	6.33	62.32
Equity	15	5.00	67.32
School choice	14	4.66	71.98
Election	12	4.00	75.98
Scandal	12	4.00	79.98
Students and teachers	15	5.00	84.98
Reassignment	9	3.00	87.98
Conflict	6	2.00	89.98
College	6	2.00	91.98
Miscellaneous	24	8.00	99.98
Total	300	99.98	

Rhetorical Devices

The 15 different categories needed explanation to give context for the rhetorical devices used in the stories. The lead researcher recorded rhetorical devices in the

evaluation of articles. The purpose of looking at rhetorical devices such as hyperbole and metaphors is to determine how each article may have included rhetoric. Tom and Eves (1999) described rhetoric as an artful deviation “that puts a twist on the familiar” (p. 1). Closely related to the devices themselves is rhetoric, which uses words to evoke emotion or to persuade someone to think or feel a certain way (Rodgers, n.d., p. 13). Rhetoric intends to promote action (Rodgers, n.d., p. 15). A journalist would be expected to avoid rhetoric in his writing to remain unbiased (Ferguson et al., 2001). Richards (2008) went farther, writing speakers and authors should avoid rhetoric. “The implication is clear: phrases that sound good but express little of a speaker’s or writer’s ‘real’ beliefs count as rhetoric” (Richards, 2008, p. 3). Billings (1992) advised would-be writers to avoid editorializing and to let the readers make judgments for themselves. In this study, editorial writing, the use of particular quotes, and sometimes the journalist’s words allowed rhetoric to creep into news stories.

Accountability

The first defined category of accountability included uses of rhetorical devices. At times, those words could blur with efforts to write in a colorful way; rhetoric often involves figurative language. For example, a story about poor test scores used a metaphor for the state’s report card. It expressed the report, “painted a dismal picture of academic performance” and was a “bleak assessment” (O’Brien & Lyttle, 1994, para. 2, para. 12). Continuing the theme of schools and progress, one story explained how all groups, either socioeconomically or based on ethnicity, had not reached their targets. The writer used a device called amplification to explain how the goals of NCLB worked. “Since one group failed the entire school failed” (Wellin, 2004, para. 12). Another story used a contradiction from the writer: “As bad as those scores may look,” where she

described further poor writing scores (Varela, 1994e, para. 12). The same writer described in another story using the device of paradox. She declared a test “that challenged youngsters to ‘use their brains’ by thinking and reasoning found that many children couldn’t do it” (Varela, 1994f, para. 1). One writer described changes to state tests calling improvements in scores “lackluster gains” (Herron, 2014d, para. 2). Few stories in the accountability category used positive language about scores. One story celebrated reporting scores under NCLB compared to former ways of reporting with a metaphor. The writer said before the federal changes “academic weaknesses can be masked” (Smith-Arrants, 2004, para. 6).

Some accountability stories invoked rhetoric used deliberately by the sources, those interviewed in the articles. One district’s efforts to improve schools was labeled the “Beacon Initiative” because the superintendent said “we want to shine a light on schools that need additional support” (Helms, 2014d, para. 5). In a different story, a superintendent said his district landed on a “warning list” due to the dropout rate (Abramson, 1994a). He used a metaphor about preventing dropouts to say that was something he already knew needed work. “You don’t have to be a rocket scientist to know we need to improve our dropout rate” (Abramson, 1994a, para. 13). A superintendent in another district celebrated the increase in writing scores with a metaphor commenting, “It’s just a matter of the clouds finally clearing and the pieces falling into place” (Walker, 2004, para. 16). In a district with low socioeconomic status, one superintendent expressed hope despite the obstacles. He, too, used a metaphor: “This system has been brow-beaten so much that after a while that mentality sets in that we’re poor Robeson and we can’t do it” (Gorman, 1994, para. 36). He said he hoped to change the perspective (Gorman, 1994).

As Ferguson et al. (2001) described, quotes “bring the person or topic to life” (p. 109). It is expected that quotes “crystallize an emotion or attitude or offer an individual perspective of some sort” (Cappon, 1999, p. 66). In this examination, quotes from principals helped do just that. One principal addressed her school not meeting expected growth explaining, “God gave us all different gifts. We’re not all the same . . . we don’t all learn at the same rate” (Achenbaum, 2004a, para. 7). Another principal recognized the pressure to earn good scores with her analogy, “We’re under the gun” (Hui, 2004c, para. 11). One principal wondered with a metaphor why more accountability was not placed on the homes. “Imagine what that faculty would be doing if they had children that came to them well-prepared from middle or above socioeconomic backgrounds. The playing field is not leveled. It never has been” (Banov, 2004d, para. 41).

The “experts” quotes used by reporters and editorialists also flavored the stories. A university professor’s quote in one story critiqued testing standards saying students could guess their way to a passing score. He said, “The bar has been set so low ‘you could almost fall over it’” (Associated Press, 2004a, para. 4). A state testing director said a new test for rising ninth-graders would help with those who said schools are not doing the job. “Many complaints about illiterate high-schoolers would disappear” (“Students will get,” 1994, para. 12).

In the accountability category, even more powerful quotes came from teachers. A teacher angry about a formula she perceived as faulty for testing and growth said, “Yet another slap in the face of students, parents and teachers by ‘those who know best’” when she learned middle school teachers would not get a bonus for scores that year (Silberman, 2004c, para. 8).

Editorial writing is one place stories might include rhetoric since it is the spot in a

newspaper where writers can be subjective and express opinions (Ferguson et al., 2001). Editorials are intended to take a stance or position on issues (Smith, 1991). The writers of editorials in this study made use of rhetoric devices in the efforts to persuade or bring about change.

For example, an editorial about making schools better declared the teacher's union had too much influence, and the governor was quoted in the story saying we need to "free our schools' from red tape" ("Chasing our tails," 1994, para. 14).

Some editorials in the accountability category blamed money for conditions. One criticized the state for taking money away from education and for poor teacher pay. The writer attributed teacher pay with teachers choosing to go to other states by using a metaphor: "And no matter what Band-Aid the legislature picks during the current short session, the bleeding away of teachers will continue" (Johnston, 2014, para. 11). Another editorial critiqued the idea that SAT scores were not rising fast enough and took on funding as part of the reason. "SAT scores are just more evidence that inadequate schooling remains the ball and chain that North Carolina will drag behind itself until its people awaken from the decades-long delusion that good schools can be had on the cheap" ("SATs say it," 1994, para. 8).

One editorialist started with good news about public schools; then, he bemoaned the fact that scores were up, barely. "The story is really one of little change—improvements of a point here, two-tenths there. As we said above, it beats the alternative, but de facto stagnation is not what our schools are supposed to be there for" ("How high," 1994, para. 4). In this instance, the writer positioned himself as an authority, another type of rhetorical device. A different editorialist said improvements in SATs were positive but indicated that North Carolina's ranking compared to other states

“may not be reason for uncorking bottles” (“An education payoff,” 2004, para. 1).

A Raleigh-based editorial described advances at a school with challenges. “The school, on the edge of a crime-scarred neighborhood east of downtown, serves many students from disadvantaged backgrounds” (“Durham’s soaring,” 2004, para. 3).

In an editorial questioning the meaningfulness of tests, the writers asked, “It’s nice to brag when scores go up a few points but who knows how much real learning those percentages represent?” (“Who knows,” 1994, para. 7). The editorial concluded with a metaphor that the real test does not come in school. “What kind of jobs they can get and hold, what contributions they make to society, how responsible they are as voters and citizens and parents—those are the tests that matter” (“Who knows,” 1994, para. 8).

A powerful editorial hearkened back to the 1983 A Nation at Risk report. It decried students’ test performance as evidence they lacked the ability to solve problems.

That must be a priority in a nation whose economic and military power both rest upon foundations of human ingenuity -- the kind that invented the hydrogen bomb and the microprocessor. We can either continue to innovate, or stumble over to history’s waste heap with the other has-beens. (“Cruellest Failure,” 1994, para. 6)

As a whole, the accountability category was a good place for rhetoric with 11 editorials in the section and 27 articles that mentioned NCLB, the ABCs of education, or both. Experts on rhetoric claim that the use of this kind of loaded language has become more common, saying that the once described empty language has become “more favorable” (Richards, 2008, p. 3). The new view on rhetoric might explain why articles were able to use rhetorical devices in spite of the formerly frowned-upon practice.

Scores and Testing

The category of scores and testing provides ample opportunity for the use of rhetorical devices as well. Oftentimes, the rhetoric was generated by the people being quoted in the stories. One story detailed how the state would begin to compare schools' scores to those from previous years. Although the superintendent was not happy with his district's performance, he was pleased with the changes in the state's reporting. His words invoked an image of archery: "I think it is better than a comparison with a moving target as in previous years" (Woodruff, 1994, para. 23). Another district administrator criticized the state's system of scoring saying testing was more about politics. He supposed what state officials might be saying, "Let's kick the schools some more, we need some whipping boys" (Varela, 1994h, para. 7).

Not only superintendents, but other district administrators used rhetorical devices to describe testing and scores. A testing coordinator explained how teachers were getting students ready for tests by "drilling students on the real-life problems on the tests" (Chappell, 1994d, para. 5). Another testing coordinator described practice tests for fourth-graders as a way to "ease students' fears" (Walker, 1994b, para. 5). In another district, a testing coordinator explained what happened after they get test results: "We now have to go back to and play detective" to determine where improvements are needed (Chappell, 1994a, para. 2).

Similar to the anxiousness described by some of the testing coordinators was a reporter's description of testing time as "nerve-wracking" for students (Mara, 1994, para. 5). Another reporter said positive testing numbers for third graders at the beginning of the year used an appeal to emotions. She wrote the scores meant the district could "avoid holding students back or sending huge numbers to summer school based on test scores"

(Helms, 2014a, para. 2).

One school board member used loaded language in a scores and testing story. While she regretted the gap between Black and White students on the SAT, she expressed pleasure that more Black students were taking the test. Using an emotional appeal, the board member complained some teachers and counselors “may assume that black students aren’t able to do higher-level work” (Varela, 1994d, para. 12).

Another article quoted a testing expert who said a new testing program would help “restore value to a high school diploma” (Associated Press, 1994d, para. 8). The quality of the tests was the center of a story about the new SAT where the writer said students would have to go beyond knowing how to “regurgitate facts” (Smolowitz, 2004d, para. 9). One donor described his idea to give college students help with school. He used the rhetorical device known as contradiction, saying, “N.C. State is a land-grant university, and land-grant universities were established for all the people of the state, not just the elite” (Price, 2014, para. 3).

Parents also used language in their comments akin to rhetoric. A parent explained her reason for not having her child take state tests at the local school. “The tests keep expanding, the stakes keep rising, and we don’t see any end in sight” (Barr, 2014a, para. 21).

Other examples of rhetorical devices came in editorials about scores and testing. One editorial blasted scores among home school students saying it would be interesting to see how they performed “when they eventually attend college or deal for an extended time with some other real-world situation away from the carefully controlled nest” (“Of course,” 1994, para. 6). Another editorial critiqued a grading mix-up for middle school tests. It said the Department of Public Instruction “botched its own math problem”

(“Flawed grading, 2004, para.10). In all, just three editorial stories fell under the header of “Scores and testing.”

Curriculum, Grading, and Scheduling

The topic of curriculum, grading, and scheduling was light on the use of rhetorical devices. One story about the school not starting until late August led some lawmakers to argue having exams after winter break would be detrimental. “That’s what we are tampering with,” said one state lawmaker (Banov, 2004a, para. 16). In a story where a district entertained the idea of going year-round, an administrator explained with a metaphor that year-round schools would help with overcrowding. “At some point in time, the glass gets full. You can’t put any more water in it” (Shaffer, 2004, para. 11).

One high-profile issue, a disagreement among state lawmakers over state standards, included rhetorical devices describing the curriculum discussion. Writers described the curriculum decision as “A fight is brewing” (Pritchard & Wolverton, 2014, para. 1). A senator in the same story, the writers described as predicting a “quick death for the standards” referring to the Common Core (Pritchard & Wolverton, 2014, para. 24). The North Carolina Chamber of Commerce criticized the possible switch away from Common Core describing a decision to roll back the standards as “a step backward for our manufacturing floors to the research labs and garages where the next big ideas are being born” (Stancill, 2014a, para. 18).

Similar complaints against the Common Core were evident in a story about a math program. A mother criticized what she called an experiment: “My biggest concern is that my children could be the guinea pigs of a trendy math program” (Silberman, 2004b, para. 28).

Another story detailed a literacy effort with a quote from the district

superintendent, saying, “I know how to jack up test scores, but if you settle for a quick fix, I can guarantee it won’t last” (Simmons, 2004c, para. 10). In a story on helping Spanish-speaking students learn their home language to possibly boost English scores, the supporters said they did not want to hold the students back. “We teach them to take pride in your roots and who you are, and be able to adapt to a new language” (Hannah-Jones, 2004e, para. 26). The article said curriculum designers did not want students to have to “shun their heritage” (Hannah-Jones, 2004e, para. 24).

No articles in the curriculum, grading, and scheduling category fell under the definition of an editorial. However, there was one story placed in the editorial section by a teacher who said, “classrooms beckon teachers” (Robinson, 1994, para. 1). The writer went on to say there are teachers “whose vibrant spirit and zest for life inspire students to not just dream, but to pursue their dreams with work and dedication until they become realities” (Robinson, 1994, para. 7). This story was published as the students headed back to school the next day.

Funding

The topic of funding provides a backdrop for lively stories with rhetorical devices. The stories often pitted the local school board against the county commission (Helms, 2004g, 2004i; Wireman, 1994b). Other funding stories dealt with how much money the state provided to districts. Many of the stories on funding allowed the writers to inject some rhetorical devices. For example, one writer called the debate between the school board and commissioners a “political brawl” (Helms, 2004i para. 7) and said the school system would have to “justify every penny” (Helms, 2004i, para. 5). In a story about the civility between the two boards, the writer said no one “traded barbs” but went on to describe the discussion the previous year where “the battle got testy” (Wireman,

1994b, para. 2, 14). Another opened, “Admit it: When politicians bicker about budgets, your eyes roll back in your head” (Helms, 2004g, para. 1). The writer explained with a colloquialism that in prior budget discussions the superintendent “caught flak for being cagey about money for busing” (Helms, 2004g, para. 22). Another writer described the funding talks between commissioners and the school board as “annual political tension and acrimony around the budget” (Rubin, 2004, para. 22). A funding story described poll results that showed public support for more taxes to help schools (Hui, 2004d). The writer explained public support was important after a “contested student assignment soured public opinion” in that particular district (Hui, 2004d, para. 5). In another story, the writer indicated there was “hope” for a struggling school that was trying a year-round schedule and signing bonuses for teachers (Helms, 2014e, para. 1).

The sources quoted at times allowed rhetoric to creep into the stories. Experts say quotations “should illustrate a point, not tell an entire story” (Fedler et al., 1997). At times, the quotes used rhetorical devices allowing the interviews to take on a life of their own. In one story, the district avoided making cuts because the state and federal monies combined to make more than originally expected. Prior to the funding decision, the district had asked for more money (Helms, 2004e). A school board member chided the superintendent with a colloquialism: “We look goofy here tonight saying we don’t have enough money” (Helms, 2004e, para. 14). One detailed memos going back and forth between a district and a judge of a landmark school quality case with the judge declaring, “You can carp all you want to, but the scores tell the story” (Durhams & Helms, 2004, para. 4). The judge went on to imply tighter management would help the district, not more money (Durhams & Helms, 2004). In another story, the state school superintendent blamed lawmakers as he argued for more school money. He said the current state budget

offered would, “throw a wrench into the efforts of North Carolina teachers to meet national educational standards” (Wellington, 1994, para. 4).

An editorial attacked the state for funding levels and described the judge over that same quality and funding matter as “losing patience over the state’s sluggish efforts” (“Student achievement,” 2004, para. 7). In total, there were three editorials on funding, each with use of rhetorical devices.

Profile

The stories under the category of profile mostly highlighted someone’s career for positive events. Writers, at times, used rhetorical devices to describe those characters. One story detailed a new principal taking the helm. The writer said of the staff, “Sometimes tradition can mean that people are set in their ways” (Helm, 2004, para. 16). Teachers described the new superintendent in one story as having a “calming effect over teachers” (Wagner, 2004d, para. 4). Another profile piece spotlighted the national principal of the year who said of her honor, “I hope the children are the winners” (O’Brien & Monk, 1994, para. 29). Another principal profile detailed her challenge of turning a school known for football success into a place of learning as she alleged, “the school’s academic reputation hasn’t always been stellar” (Helms, 2004h, para. 20). Another principal of the year candidate celebrated bringing together different types of students: “We’ve created a family-type atmosphere where we take care of each other, regardless” (Dunn, 2014c, para. 6).

One story that profiled an outstanding student included rhetorical comments from his cross country coach. The coach said he saw the runner “as the cornerstone of a program that can quickly rise to the top” (Wilkerson-New, 2014, para. 15).

A story about the university president possibly leaving the school, quoted

members of the board of trustees, saying, “a void will be created” with his departure (Mooneyham, 1994b, para. 3). Another university president spoke of prioritizing academics over athletics: “We’re not going to let black student athletes flunk out. We’re not going to use them and then thank them and pat them on the back and send them on their way” (Perlmott, 1994, para. 15).

One story profiling veteran teachers quoted a new teacher complaining that extra training repeated what she had already learned in college. “I just feel like a cog in a big bureaucratic wheel. I just so want to have some time to apply what I know” (Helms, 2004d, para. 67). She went on to say the pressure from testing was too much (Helms, 2004d).

As a group, the profile stories were not laced with lots of rhetorical devices. As described earlier, the profile pieces fit the bill of “soft news” (Fedler et al., 1997; Smith, 1991). As Smith (1991) explained, these stories “are journalistic dessert: tasty to consume, but really not necessary” (p. 266).

Race

The category of race in the study provided an opportunity for rhetorical devices to appear in the news stories. In a story about a judge who had helped minorities gain better access to schools, the writer said protesters “posted hate mail by the bushel” to that judge (Neff, 1994, para. 1). Another columnist wrote of parents pulling their students out of public school,

I don’t know about you, but my first inclination is to say sayonara, bon voyage, arrivederci, don’t let the door hit ya’ where the good Lord . . . Oops, it wouldn’t be prudent -- or wise -- to bid such a fond adieu to white residents of Durham who are pulling their kids out of Durham Public Schools like a blind dentist pulling

teeth.” (Saunders, 2004, para. 1)

He went on to say that the public schools need people to stay, but “Durham schools are better off without them or their poisoned progeny” (Saunders, 2004, para. 15).

Other examples of rhetorical devices came from the people interviewed for the particular stories. For example, a White student attending a historically Black college said he sometimes met resistance as he used an analogy: “I had assumed the old white South had grown archaic and pathetically withered away” (Brooks, 1994a, para. 20). In another story about historically Black schools, one university president said the school suffered from overexpansion, which led to poor graduation rates. “They were recruiting a lot of students who had no business being there,” he said (Stancill, 2014c, para. 16). In a story about tackling the achievement gap, an instructional coach for struggling schools said, “The parents of successful students also refuse to use race or poverty as an excuse. And they don’t allow teachers to use race or poverty as an excuse for their children” (Simmons, 2004b, para. 10).

Another example of how race prompted rhetoric came in opinion pieces. One writer spoke of how segregation affects schools in modern day. “But a main impetus for ‘white flight’ is the perception that as a neighborhood’s black population rises, the quality of its schools declines” (Ford, 1994, para. 15).

The idea that some parents move to the suburbs to avoid sending their children to urban schools, known as “White flight,” was part of a story about society needing to be integrated (Krentz, 1994, para. 18). The speaker argued when cities started dismantling desegregation plans, parents became less involved in schools and scores went down (Krentz, 1994). In a story about parents trying to help improve schools, the writer said African-American leaders in the community blamed “White flight” for low enrollment at

some neighborhood schools (Helms, 2004f, para. 10). Other community activists, mostly White parents, argued it was simply “flight,” or more people choosing private schools that affected low enrollments at public schools (Helms, 2004f, para. 11).

On the whole, there were few examples of rhetoric and rhetorical devices in the stories categorized as race. One reason may be because it is the journalist’s responsibility to be “politically correct” (Ferguson et al., 2001, p. 161). Writers are trained to avoid painful words in their writing and avoid those with overtones (Ferguson et al., 2001).

Equity

The category of equity was different than race in terms of the use of persuasive and rhetorical language. Many of the stories dealt with the impact of poverty for students’ outcomes and opportunities, and oftentimes those stories related performance to socioeconomic status. In schools with more disadvantaged students, few of those participated in the academically gifted program (Chappell, 1994c). In an effort to find ways to bring gifted education to more students, one board member said he’s “not jumping through hoops to make them kids (at Central) score as high as the kids at Robinson” (Chappell, 1994c, para. 30). The board member said he did not want to change school boundaries within the district just to have more gifted students at another school (Chappell, 1994c). The board member suggested training parents of low socioeconomic status to help them get their children “excited about coming to school” (Chappell, 1994c, para. 29). He explained that if students from low socioeconomics were more interested in school, more might improve achievement and performance to be qualified as academically gifted (Chappell, 1994c).

Another story described a redistricting plan that created new problems for schools. “It also created a landscape of unequal schools where low-income students

struggle to succeed,” the writer said (Herron, 2014b, para. 2). The district intended to start a new magnet to help with the inequities (Herron, 2014b).

In an article about teacher transfer limit, the superintendent said the limit had not detrimentally affected schools. “There was no mass exodus from the district,” he said (Helms, 2004c, para. 12).

One story dealing with a major court case regarding adequate funding for poor districts explained that the governor and state school superintendent had “voiced some sympathy” for the districts who were suing (Associated Press, 1994a, para. 16). A report from the judge in the equity case blasted teachers and principals for what he called the state’s “reading problem” (Stancill, 2014b, para. 4). Partly in response to his words, the state passed a law requiring all third graders to be proficient in reading before moving on the fourth grade (Stancill, 2014b). Of the reading mandate, an education professor said, “I cannot think of a better way to make a generation hate reading than this” (Stancill, 2014b, para. 23).

School Choice

School choice is a category where there were plenty of examples of rhetoric and by default rhetorical devices. As Carr (2010) explained, “The freedom of parents to choose where their children attended schools, (became) abbreviated and recoded simply as ‘choice’” (p. 24). The idea of choice could apply to private, magnet, charter, or home schools. For example, in one story, the writers claimed parents and students were choosing to leave the public schools “whose reputations are increasingly being damaged by social and academic problems” (Healy & Jackson, 1994, para. 5). The writers stated the “defections threaten to become more serious” (Healy & Jackson, 1994, para. 14) and after those families leave, the “public school system becomes a little weaker for those

who remain” (Healy & Jackson, 1994, para. 12). The report continued, saying parents hear “perennial reports about the state’s low test scores” (Healy & Jackson, 1994, para. 30).

Another writer assumed a positive stance in the school choice debate, the debate between public schools or other options, by profiling a National Merit Scholar who was home schooled. The writer said that the home schooled student’s “education has been tailored to fit her interests and has been delivered in the place she feels most comfortable—her home” (Abramson, 1994b, para. 3). The student’s mother explained the reason for home schooling in the story: “Our main reason was not to be able to have our kids become superbrains. It was more to develop good character with parents who love them and cared about them” (Abramson, 1994b, para. 19).

On the downside of school choice, one report discussed how a business owner managed several charter schools and rented the buildings, desks, and other supplies to the school. A critic said, “This kind of conflict of interest is what I would consider shocking” (Wang, 2014, para. 19). The businessmen defended himself in the story, saying a request for financial documents was the state’s way of heading in the wrong direction. “I see the banks of the river narrowing. In a few more years, there will just be a very narrow channel to navigate in. A lot of the freedoms will be regulated out” (Wang, 2014, para. 59).

Using rhetoric, one editorial took a strong position about school choice, condemning the idea of vouchers for public schools. It said voucher supporters argue, “The result would be so-called ‘freedom of choice’ for parents and a public school system forced to improve by competition” (“Vouchers fail,” 1994, para. 1). The opinion piece added that “Vouchers are public assistance for those who need it least” (“Vouchers

fail,” 1994, para. 4).

Another opinion piece explained that a new report said charter school students performed worse than traditional public school students on math and reading (“Assessing charter,” 2004). The writer said charter supporters should not be so quick to dismiss the report.

But those who point a gotcha finger at charters do a disservice, too. Charters fill a legitimate niche. They cannot meet all the challenges of public schooling. But when done right, they do help some students meet their academic potential.

(“Assessing charter,” 2004, para. 5)

The editorial concluded that the report should be taken as information on how to improve all schools, charters or otherwise (“Assessing charter,” 2004).

Another story denounced the choice movement for not meeting expectations. It chronicled the State Board of Education’s vote to not renew the charter of a school that had questionable finances, poor test scores, and low graduation rates (Alexander, 2014b). One story took a more ambivalent tone advising parents to do the research before considering a charter (Helms, 2014f). A charter supporter responded to the legislature’s lifting of the state’s cap on charters: “I think it’s a windfall for parents. Most of us want to see the tide rise for all” (Helms, 2014f, para. 36). He added charter schools force public schools to be more innovative (Helms, 2014f).

For innovation, one new charter school intended to teach every child piano and piano theory. Teachers said the focus would be good for students. “I am inspired by the passion that our director has for teaching children by breaking down barriers that prohibit growth, so that all children can reach their full potential” (O’Gorman, 2014, para. 18).

As with the other categories, school choice contained rhetoric from the writers

themselves, in editorials, and from sources quoted in the stories. With the choice debate ongoing, it was expected the rhetoric included would be colorful.

Election

Rhetorical devices were abundant in the category called election with loaded language about schools and the candidates. One story told of how 19 candidates were “gunning for their jobs” of a seated school board with only five seats to be filled (Chappell, 1994b, para. 3). The story noted that a group of conservative Christians had formed a bloc for possible votes saying, “they are united in the belief that the school system has drifted too far from the sound values kids were once taught in school” (Chappell, 1994b, para. 6). Many of the candidates spoke out against the former superintendent who they say “did not communicate well with the public and with school employees, thus fueling controversies that a better communicator could have squelched” (Chappell, 1994b, para. 8). Another school board campaign offered a perspective from a candidate who said, “Teachers work in an atmosphere of fear and frustration” (Nimocks, 1994, para. 11). The candidate added the teachers did not have time to teach (Nimocks, 1994). In the contest for another local seat, the county commission, one candidate said he wanted to “keep crime in check and improve education” (Collins, 1994, para. 12).

Another campaign looked at the race for governor with the incumbent praising test scores under former administrations and during his first term. He accused his opponent of “lying wildly” (Griffin, 2004, para. 1). The article’s writer provided counter arguments that the challenger intends to return a “sense of optimism” to the state (Griffin, 2004, para. 20).

One campaign detailed the race between a career educator and a businessman for the position of state school superintendent. The writers described the contest as a case of

“insider versus outsider” (Helms & Smolowitz, 2004, para. 1).

Scandal

In the category of scandal, some interviewed for the stories provided the rhetoric. For example, in a story about a contract extension for a superintendent who had weathered several investigations, one teacher said, “It’s a shame. Teachers are afraid to talk. It’s so sad – we’re all so paranoid. We just know that he would find some way to get to us” (Wagner, 2004b, para. 20). In the same county, the state investigated allegations a principal paid low-performing students to not take the SAT (Wagner, 2004b). The state found that the money should not be spent that way and ordered it repaid, but no action was taken against the principal (Wagner, 2004b). A school board candidate said, “I am disappointed that the state decided not to reprimand a principal who deliberately manipulated his school’s SAT average by selecting which students should take the test and then paying them” (Wagner, 2004a, para. 21). Another superintendent fell out of favor for allegations he misled the school board and community about the costs of a construction project (Dunn, 2014d). The board chair said, “It pains me that this has tainted the reputation of this district and this community” after the superintendent offered to resign (Dunn, 2014d, para. 10).

Another story that dominated the scandal category and included rhetoric was about the so-called “paper classes” at UNC-Chapel Hill. A whistleblower alleged the classes did not meet and were offered to keep athletes academically eligible. One opinion writer said the cheating started before college (Taylor, 2014, Headline). He called on coaches to help student-athletes instead of letting them “skirt the system” (Taylor, 2014, para. 12). He also said any teacher or coach who helped students get passed through school is “a blight on the education profession” and should be fired

(Taylor, 2014, para. 22). A former player continued the rhetoric against UNC academics by saying they were a “scam.” The former athlete claimed, “The university didn’t stand up; they didn’t have my back” (Kane, 2014a, para. 30).

In the small category of scandal, opportunities for rhetoric came from the sources interviewed and the opinion writers. There were no examples in this category where the writers may have used their own rhetorical devices.

Students and Teachers

An examination for rhetoric in the category of students and teachers illustrates the topic was broad and varied. A group promoting children’s mental health said, “Happy kids do better on tests” making the case for more mental health services at school (Winn, 2004a, para. 8). Another story spoke of trying to get more students to eat breakfast and offering it for free in some schools. A spokesperson with a conservative think-tank injected rhetoric when he said the schools should make sure the program helped low-income families. “I think it’s important that these programs are able to attract the populations for which they’re designed” (Barr, 2014b, para. 14).

On the topic of teachers, one story included the rhetorical device of hyperbole when the personnel committee discussed how to get top teachers in the toughest schools. As the committee worked towards a solution, the chair addressed pay incentives, but “at the rate we’re going to do this, none of us will be alive to tell it” (Helms, 2004a, para. 3). An incredibly positive story about teachers detailed how one teacher continued to push a low-performing student. Of the formerly struggling student, the teacher commented, “She just blossomed. She came in on the bottom and really grew” (Herron, 2014c, para. 9).

Reassignment

Reassignment was a topic that featured vivid quotes that included rhetoric, particularly rhetorical devices from parents. “Children in the county schools are being educated at a higher level than in the city schools” said one parent (Lyttle, 1994a, para. 5). Another parent complained the district changed boundaries after he decided to move to a particular neighborhood. “The way it happened so fast is what boggled our minds. We looked at the test scores, we looked at the brochure. Then, poof, it’s gone” (Norwood, 1994, para. 16). In one case, parents filed a lawsuit to stop a district’s redistricting plan. The parent group alleged, “The school board developed and finalized its redistricting plan in secret and in a way ‘that appears to have been designed to exclude the public from participation in the process,’ in violation of state laws” (Bell, 2014b, para. 11). A follow-up story on the same court case purported a secret decision by district leaders. “It was a sham vote because it was determined prior to the meeting” (Bell, 2014a, para. 6). The reassignment category was small when looking at the whole sample but certainly had some of the strongest language and rhetoric of any of the articles.

Conflict

Conflict is a stand-alone category because the stories featured a struggle but no solution. Some of the rhetoric in this category came from the interviews. One story featured a superintendent who was asked to leave. It quoted school board members as making the decision after support in the public schools eroded (Chappell, 1994e). Board members said all the blame could not be placed on the superintendent. “But living like Chicken Little can be exhausting when you’re jumping from crisis to crisis. It was an emotional decision” (Chappell, 1994e, para. 10). Another story questioned some of a

superintendent's reforms saying his plans to transfer an entire staff backfired. "I don't know of a general who can win a war without the troops," said a friend of the superintendent (Moss, 1994, para. 38). An editorial told of a school board who writers argued should have taken stronger action. "The members of Moore County's school board charted a course for trouble and succeeded in finding it. Now, they have little choice but to keep sailing toward the rocks" ("Unnecessary test," 2004, para. 2). The rhetoric for the conflict category largely came from the quotes included in the stories and a bit from the writers themselves.

College

The final concrete category of college used figures of speech to dress up the articles. Journalists are taught to use "fresh ways to express ideas" (Smith, 1991, p. 111). One story suggested a college fair was a good place for students to "dip their toes into the waters of college exploration" (Bierer, 2014b, para. 1). Another suggested organizing college applications early instead of students enjoying their "last lazy days of summer" (Bierer, 2014d, para. 2). The difference with the college category from all other categories is that the articles were mostly informational pieces not intended to take a side on any issue.

Miscellaneous

By nature of a catch-all category called miscellaneous, there was no central theme in the rhetoric found in these stories. The majority of stories in this varied category came in the traditional news sections of the newspapers, but editorials on education reform comprised five of the stories in the miscellaneous category. One editorial featured a businessman's speech who said change for schools needs to come faster.

We can't keep doing the same old thing and expect to achieve any progress.

Perhaps we're reaching the point where we can no longer stand for incrementalism. I've long been an advocate of patience when it comes to education. But I worry now that our patience is decaying into an acceptance of business as usual. ("Chasing our," 1994, para. 9)

In another opinion piece congratulating high school graduates, the editorialists offered this advice: "Parents and students and teachers ought to remember the shortcomings of the schools, as well as the strengths, when they talk to principals and school board members, to county commissioners and legislators" ("Congratulations, graduates," 1994, para. 5). One editorial celebrated a program to help incoming high school students who were behind grade level based on state tests. It implied students had been allowed to fall by the wayside along the way. "By the time, they're in high school, many are doing so poorly they're in danger of failing or dropping out" ("Tackling high," 2004, para. 3).

Several news stories in the miscellaneous category dealt with staffing. One article was about extending a superintendent's contract (Achenbaum, 2004b). Another story (Wagner, 2004c) was about a district's search for a superintendent after the district had to pay back money to the state for an SAT scandal. "A school board investigation found that low-performing students were encouraged not to take the SAT, and that state remediation money for students at risk of dropping out was used to reward students who scored high on the test" (Wagner, 2004c, para. 13). The board members expressed frustration about the inquiries into the SAT questions at one school. "We've spent a lot on legal fees. Who knows, there might be a third investigation coming up soon. We keep on spending. We've got to stop sometime" (Wagner, 2004c, para. 14).

Another story included rhetoric connected to a district's plan to reduce principal turnover (Helms, 2014c). One professor said the pressure to improve scores often leads

to districts making personnel switches: “I think they’re pulling the trigger on changing principals more quickly. They think they’re doing something positive, but that churn just kills schools” (Dunn, 2014a, para. 24). A similar story credited the principal for improved scores saying she “pulled the school out of the cellar” (Healy, 1994, para. 2).

In probably the most unusual story to pop up in the search for test scores was a story about several school employees getting arrested for a drug ring (Gordon et al., 2014). The story told of how parents had gone to social media sites to put down the school after the arrests. A Parent-Teacher Organization leader said the parents making threats to remove their children after the arrests were not the ones involved in the school anyway. She said, “I want this to be clear: The acts of one person or several people do not define a community. They do not define a school” (Gordan et al., 2014, para. 15).

Finally, a miscellaneous story praised students for earning the status of National Merit Scholars because of their test scores (Abramson, 1994c). One of the high-scoring students credited her teachers, but a testing expert and a school system spokesperson said the achievement was “not to provide a measurement of high-school or school system quality (Abramson, 1994c, para. 11).

As a whole, all of the categories included some kind of rhetoric. At times, the rhetoric used figures of speech and colorful language to draw in the reader yet avoided “being cute or flowery” (Ferguson et al., 2001, p. 379). The news writer himself or herself sometimes used rhetoric. More often, the rhetoric came from the quotes used in the stories. People were interviewed to “make a story lively, give it a human touch, let reader begin to understand what a source is like” (Ferguson et al., 2001, p. 191). Lastly, rhetoric is used more frequently and appropriately by the editorialists where the position of the publication’s editors is published albeit anonymously behind the definition of a

staff editorial. Each of the delivery methods, through the writer, the sources, or in an editorial intended to move people to action based on the rhetoric included in each article.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to determine the themes and patterns printed in four North Carolina newspapers regarding “test scores” in public schools. The study included an inductive, QCA of news articles from newspapers. Coding each article for the topic, the tone toward education, the tone about testing, type of test, page number, date, sources quoted, and the rhetorical devices used give insight into the meaning of each article and the articles collectively. A content analysis of systematically sampled articles from a pool of more than 1,500 news stories during a 20-year period found the dominant theme in the study was accountability. In fact, 17 accountability stories appeared in the newspapers before NCLB was a federal law. Twenty-six stories about accountability appeared in 2004 editions, 2 years after NCLB was signed, and seven came in 2014 news reports for a total of 50 articles about accountability. Other dominant topics were scores and testing, funding, curriculum, grading, and scheduling.

There were 4,380 days under review for possible articles about testing. Of the possible amount of articles that could have appeared in the 3 years for the four different papers, a story about “test scores” related to any topic was printed about every fourth day. The initial search for “test scores” yielded nearly 1,575 results. When the 1,575 were whittled down to those that actually dealt with test scores and not duplications, sports, or health inspections, there were 1,171 articles. The researcher took every fifth article in the initial search for study. Three-hundred stories were coded for the examination, or 25.6% of the universe (1,171) for the study. A trial coder reviewed 69 of the same articles the lead researcher studied. The two agreed on the topic in 86.9% of the trial articles. Wimmer and Dominick as cited in Hogan (2013) wrote that agreement of 80% or better is considered acceptable in most situations.

For the tone about education, as anticipated, the articles were mostly negative. One hundred forty-one of the 300 articles were negative about education and often included words like “have and have-nots,” “shuffling kids,” “feuding,” and “infighting.” On testing, 164 stories were negative and either focused on the negative results or implications of the test scores (“dismal results,” “not fair,” and “need improvement”) or on people’s negative attitudes about testing. The negative angle on testing was also anticipated. As Hogan (2013) described, much of the language in newspapers regarding schools says they are “failing” (p. 12). Furthermore, Tyack and Cuban (1995) pointed out that the public thinks schools are “worse than they used to be” (p. 13). They continued that “the media often presented very negative images and accounts of schools” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 32). The negative tone for both education and testing could be predicted because “conflict” is an expected element of news, whether it concerns “peoples’ disagreements or events beyond readers’ control” (Smith, 1991, p. 75).

The tests named in the articles were often generally interpreted to be EOG or EOC tests designed and scored by the North Carolina Department of Instruction. Specifically, 52 articles referenced the EOG, and 35 mentioned the EOC. At least 56 articles focused on the SAT, a test meant to determine the college readiness of students (Chappell, 1994a; “The next step,” 1994; Wrinn, 2004b).

Other measures for this investigation include word counts, page numbers, and dates. The placement of a story and its length contributes to the value the publisher places on the article (Ferguson et al., 2001). The majority of the stories (73) published were during August and September, a time when back-to-school is fresh on North Carolina readers’ minds. Eighty-seven articles appeared on the front page, a premier placement designed to get the reader’s attention (Ferguson et al., 2001; Utt & Pasternack,

2003). Articles contained within the first section of the newspapers totaled 66, and 59 more articles appeared on the front of the “B” section, often labeled “State and Local.” The articles’ positions in the papers show that the stories on tests scores were intended to have some prominence. The coding also marked word counts to find the average story contained 785 words or about 26 column inches depending on column width and font.

Lastly, the articles were coded for sources quoted and for examples of rhetoric. A district administrator or district spokesperson was quoted in 152 articles. The fewest people quoted were teachers and students. As Tyack and Cuban (1995) pointed out, the most significant change for public schools happens in the classroom, but they say “it is the hardest to achieve” (p. 10). Strikingly, the teachers (41) and students (31) were not quoted in many stories, and yet teachers and students are key in discussions on improving schools or test scores.

At times, the rhetoric came from the writers who scripted such things as improvements in scores yielded “lackluster gains” (Herron, 2014d, para. 2); however, the rhetoric came mostly from the sources. For example, one article quoted a teacher who was frustrated that some teachers would not get a bonus from the state for their role in helping improve student test scores, calling the decision, “Yet another slap in the face of students, parents and teachers by ‘those who know best’”(Silberman, 2004c, para. 8). Finally, rhetoric came in editorials. As Ferguson et al. (2001) described, the newspaper editorial is referred to as “‘the voice of the paper’” (p. 302). It stands to reason that editorials can include rhetoric. They are not the same as news articles; an editorial does express “a point of view” (Ferguson et al., 2001, p. 302). Rhetoric was included, for example, in an opinion piece arguing for more school funding, noting that “SAT scores are just more evidence that inadequate schooling remains the ball and chain that North

Carolina will drag behind itself until its people awaken from the decades-long delusion that good schools can be had on the cheap” (“SATs say it,” 1994, para. 8).

Alignment with the Literature

In this study, the findings aligned well with the research on the number of reports, the substance of the stories, and the topics (Campanella, 2014; Hogan, 2013; O’Neill, 2012; Rhoades, 2004; Treyens, 1997). The findings also supported the idea of agenda-setting. This study did not examine the media’s role in determining what members of the public and policymakers learn, think about, and discuss; however, agenda-setting theory cannot be ignored for this examination (Carr, 2015; Edwards & Cromwell, 2006; Entman, 2007; Kwansah-Aidoo, 2005; McCombs & Shaw, 1972, 1993; Tan, 2008). Agenda-setting theory is the conceptual framework that illustrates the idea that the media does not tell the public what to think but does impact what the public thinks about (Carr, 2015; Edwards & Cromwell, 2006; Entman, 2007; Kwansah-Aidoo, 2005; McCombs & Shaw, 1972, 1993; Tan, 2008). Graber (1988) extended the idea by writing that “audiences condense the offerings in their own ways, select aspects of interest, and integrate them into their own thinking” (p. 258). Graber’s concept of integration into thinking is pivotal for this examination. As the subject matter in reporting on “test scores” is uncovered, this researcher got a sense of what the public is reading and thereby thinking.

This current study looked at North Carolina newspapers to determine themes and patterns in newspaper reports. It determined the majority of news reports on “test scores” dealt with accountability. The new findings validate earlier research. Accountability was the dominant theme in Rhoades’s (2004) findings. She found the effects of agenda-setting in her study, saying the media builds public attitudes about topics. Rhoades said

“newspaper accounts of educational testing programs present an overly repetitive, one-sided view leaving ordinary citizens few alternatives to the current testing regime” (p. 277). She argued further “test scores” can be rigged (Rhoades, 2004, p. 231) and rejected accountability as the appropriate frame or category for news stories on testing.

Treyens (1997) concluded that educational news stories were presented from the political aspect instead of the substance of the policy. This held true with the current study since 12 stories were specifically about elections and candidates. Politics also factor more generally into other story categories such as accountability (50), funding (28), and school choice (14).

Campanella (2014), a self-described supporter of school choice, found that funding and school choice were dominant themes in a review of 5,000 articles. Those story topics were recurring in this current study with a total count of 42.

O’Neil (2012) determined that education stories presented schools as being in “crisis.” O’Neil also found the abundance of stories dealt with accountability and funding instead of what happens in the classroom. O’Neil’s findings are supported in the current research with the majority of the stories having a negative tone about education and a negative tone about testing. Further, her study is supported in this review because so few teachers (41) and students (31) were quoted in the stories. Little perspective of the people actually in the classrooms was found in this current study.

Hogan’s (2013) review supported O’Neil’s conclusions (2012) and is reinforced in this study as well. Hogan found that news articles perpetuated the idea that schools are failing. Hogan also discovered that the majority of articles (77.1%) assigned blame for schools in “crisis.” While this researcher did not count for the word “crisis,” the majority of the stories presented negative views on public education and testing.

Scarcity of Coverage

While this study found an article with the words “test scores” once every 4 days (26.7%) in the total possible days in the sample, few stories were actually about “test scores.” Combining the two closest categories “accountability” with “scores and testing” yielded 82 articles. Given that 4,380 days were under review in the 3 years and four newspapers, 82 articles about the given topic is sparse. The dearth of articles actually about test scores was anticipated by the lead researcher. The words “testing” and “scores” are invoked on a myriad of subjects, but close examination of the stories finds very few actually deal with the topic. The rest are tangential.

DeMoss (2009) supported this finding of scarcity with his study showing only 1.32% of all stories aired on major networks deal with education of any topic. West et al. (2009) went even further in their research saying education coverage is “scant” (p. 1).

Difference in Years and Newspapers

The lead researcher anticipated that more articles about “test scores” would be printed by *The Raleigh News and Observer*, the paper based in the state capital of North Carolina and charged with coverage of state news; however, articles from *The Charlotte Observer* made up 45% of the universe for the sample. This might be explained because, according to both newspapers’ business offices, *The Charlotte Observer* has a broader circulation (123,683 in 2014) than *The Raleigh News and Observer* (112,549 in 2014). By default, a bigger paper would have a bigger staff. Both papers are now owned by the corporate news company, McClatchy. However, in the first 2 years of the sample, the Raleigh paper was owned by the Daniels’ family (personal communication, Jim Puryear, September 27, 2016). The ownership of the newspapers, whether corporate or family-based did not seem to play a part in the type of reports published in each paper. Each

year and by default, the ownership had an assortment of story topics.

As was anticipated, the bulk of the articles came during 2004, just 2 years after Congress passed NCLB and then G.W. Bush signed into law in 2002. As Reddell (2010) argued, the federal law is what “set the testing frenzy of the United States in motion” (p. 6). Forty-two percent of the total stories in the study were published in 2004.

Surprisingly, only 25.6% of the articles were published in 2014. While, 2014 has more than a decade’s distance from the passage of NCLB, the law was still in place during that year. NCLB was set to be revised in 2007; but after years of no changes, it was finally reiterated in December 2015 as ESSA (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Furthermore, in the summer of 2013, the North Carolina legislature passed the Excellence in Public Education Act for North Carolina, which mandated third graders be proficient in reading and instituted additional testing before they could be promoted to fourth grade (Smith & Imig, 2014). This researcher anticipated that article counts about testing would not drop in North Carolina but increase in later years since there is now more state-mandated testing (Smith & Imig, 2014). The supposition of an article increase was not demonstrated in the current study.

Anticipations about Topics

As was anticipated, very few articles actually dealt with “test scores”; but as this study shows, the tentacles of politics reach into nearly every category. County commissioners decide local funding for districts, and the state’s General Assembly determines funding for districts (Wellington, 1994; Wireman, 1994b). Funding accounted for 28 articles. Candidates running for office used “test scores” as part of their platform, either positively or negatively (Collins, 1994; Nimocks, 1994). Election stories composed the topic of 12 stories. School board members, themselves elected leaders,

help distribute funding for schools, set local policies, and are in charge of approving district boundaries (Zlotkin, 1993). As this study found, redistricting and reassignment decided by school boards combined to form an explosive topic in nine stories (Bell, 2014b; Dunn 2014b; Lyttle, 1994a). School choice is loaded with political disagreements as some lawmakers believe that public money should be used for private school vouchers and/or the number of publicly funded charter schools, while others are adamantly opposed to one of both of these ideas (Goodall, 2016; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). School choice comprised 14 stories (Abramson, 1994b; Healy & Jackson, 1994). State lawmakers debated the use of the standards adopted by the state called Common Core with some vowing to dismantle it (Pritchard & Wolverton, 2014). Curriculum, grading, and scheduling was the topic of 34 stories (Banov 2004a; Shaffer, 2004). Even in the miscellaneous category, politics as it relates to the economy was present. President Barack Obama was quoted in a story saying more funding was necessary for education to remain globally competitive (Schram, 2014). Other miscellaneous stories and editorials (“Chasing our tails,” 1994; “Congratulations, graduates,” 1994) dealt with reform, a code-word Tyack and Cuban (1995) argued for change, which they claim “is not synonymous with progress” (p. 5).

Nearly every news story category had some fringe-related association to politics with only two lacking direct political ties. These included news stories categorized as college, which gave hints on test taking and applying for college (Bierer, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d; Sutton, 2004) and profile stories. Profiles highlighted achievements of strong principals or district leaders, who are politically approved for their positions by locally elected school boards (Perlmott, 1994; Wireman, 1994a). Several of the profile stories were remotely linked to politics. For example, one news item about a new

superintendent noted that she was winning praise from teachers and district leaders, an example of the micropolitics district leaders must navigate (Wagner, 2004d; Zlotkin, 1993). This is particularly true for school superintendents who are the only employees in a district who are hired by their respective school boards (Wagner, 2004d).

Lastly, accountability was the subject of 50 stories. This topic has direct political implications (Abramson, 1994a; Helms, 2004d; O'Brien & Lyttle, 1994; Smith-Arrants, 2004). State and federal lawmakers passed accountability measures that required schools to test regularly and track and report student proficiency rates and sanction school leaders and teachers when students do not meet performance expectations (Carr, 2015; Fabrizio, 2006; Hunt, 2001; Johnson, 2005; NCDPI, 2012a; Reddell, 2010).

What is Old is New(s)

One of the discoveries of this study is that many of the stories printed in 1994, 2004, and 2014 could be published in North Carolina newspapers today and still remain relevant. For instance, a 1994 story examined the tension students feel preparing for tests (Mara, 1994). An editorial called "Chasing our tails" (1994) pointed out that sometimes the business community feels education is "standing still" (para. 8). Another 1994 story chronicled how parents feel frustrated when district boundaries change, resulting in their children going to schools different from where they were originally assigned to go (Norwood, 1994). Some stories dealt with test quality and encouraged parents to push children to have "higher-level thinking skills" (Chappell, 1994d, para. 10). Wrinn (1994) examined the fight school districts wage with county commissioners to get funding for classrooms to help with class size; otherwise, programs must be cut. Most significantly, many of the stories on accountability could be printed in today's newspapers. For example, a 1994 Raleigh-based story about accountability spoke of a district's need to

evaluate curriculum based on test performance (Kauffman, 1994c). The story continued with details on how the state publishes report cards based on proficiency rates of students (Kauffman, 1994c). One district superintendent expressed frustration that the report cards did not help districts teach to “mastery levels” (Kauffman, 1994c, para. 10).

This researcher did not anticipate that 19 stories, or 6.3%, would have a theme of race. In the 20-year span of the study, many of the stories from the prior years could be printed today. One story had an obvious racial connection reporting that Asian students top the particular county’s SAT scores (Hui, 2004a). Several stories dealt with the gap between performance of White students and Black students on standardized tests (Achenbaum, 2004c; Alexander, 2014a; Hannah-Jones, 2004a; Krentz, 1994; Simmons, 2004a, 2004b). Two stories looked at historically Black colleges discussing how the schools could recruit and keep quality candidates (Brooks, 1994a; Stancill, 2014c). Another story celebrated the success of Black female students who were college bound crediting the 1954 landmark desegregation decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education* with part of their success (Ford, 1994). One story explained that scores of minority students and scores of those classified as economically disadvantaged were similar (Achenbaum 2004c). One story discussed how magnet schools were pulling students away leaving neighborhood schools with high numbers of minority and disadvantaged students, who traditionally have lower test performance (Helms, 2004f). Another went further as the writer likened White parents pulling their children out of public schools to a “blind dentist pulling teeth” (Saunders, 2004, para. 2).

All of these stories under the category of race discussed substantive issues that still affect public schools today and confound school leaders. According to Rothstein (1998), the gap in minority versus nonminority scores has narrowed since 1973 (p. 81).

Patterson (2001) reported the Black-White gap in scores narrowed a bit until the mid-1980s. The Nation's Report Card released by NCES (2013) showed the racial gap was half of what it was when tracking scores from 1971 to 2012. Still, a gap exists. Perhaps it is this researcher's naiveté that the gap in scores is still news. Perhaps the repetition of stories that could have been published 20 years ago is an indictment of journalism. One writer said that in the information age, "there will be even more need for highly skill journalists to root through it (information), filter out what's important, and help put it in perspective" (Underwood, 1995, p. 36). This current study did not clarify that journalists are publishing perspective on education based on race or otherwise. Perhaps the number of stories about race and scores are an indictment on education despite best efforts to tackle a complex social issue. Perhaps the achievement gap indicts both journalism and education. It simply was not anticipated that this many stories in the sample would appear dealing with race and particularly with the gap in scores.

Who's Talking Now?

As was anticipated, the majority of sources quoted in the articles were "officials." As Carr (2015) discussed, elite leaders have "greater access to the news media" resulting "in more elite leaders having greater influence over the topics and issues that comprise the public agenda" (p. 63). This was evidenced in the current study with superintendents, associate superintendents, or a school system spokesperson being quoted in 152 articles. The next most often quoted source was a catch-all category. "Interested citizen" included lawyers, union representatives, business leaders, researchers, university professors, and more. In the articles, quotes from those sources who could be called "other" appeared 133 times. Those in the other category did not necessarily have expertise in education and testing but were quoted nearly as much as district personnel. Lastly, teachers were

quoted in 41 articles and students in 31.

For educators, the implications are that people outside of the field are contributing too much of the conversation about schooling and testing. Imagine if the editorial board of the often-searched website WebMD, which reports 9.6 million in monthly U.S traffic on its site, were laypeople (Webmd.com Traffic and Demographic Statistics by Quantcast, n.d.). Instead, WebMD uses four doctors as editors and reports the use of more than 100 doctors and health experts from around the country to produce content for the site (Who we are, n.d.).

Problems for News Organizations

As evidenced in the circulation chart in Chapter 4 on methodology, newspaper circulation has dropped significantly. *The Charlotte Observer's* circulation, provided by circulation, budget, and planning manager Jermaine Burns, was down 48% from 1994 to 2014. According to *The Raleigh News and Observer's* regional vice president for audience development, Jim Puryear, the next biggest paper in the study, *The N& O*, had a circulation drop from 2004 to 2014 of 54%. Circulation administrative assistant Janet Person of *The Fayetteville Observer* reports the paper's circulation fell between 1994 and 2014 by 45%; and according to Jim Rhyne of *The Winston-Salem Journal*, circulation for *The Winston-Salem Journal* from 1994 to 2014 declined 49%.

Furthermore, time spent reading a newspaper is declining. Prior research shows time spent reading a newspaper varies from 8.24 minutes (Moser, 2014) to 39.92 minutes ("Survey: Community papers," 2013). Most surveys place reading time around 16.3 minutes (Sweney, 2015). This lack of exposure to stories on testing seems more exaggerated when considering Graber's (1988) reflections. She claimed "two out of every three stories have been excluded" when a reader finishes the newspaper (Graber,

1988, p. 249). As prior studies report, the total amount of time spent reading newspapers, which might happen to have a story about scores and testing, is small.

Despite the time spent reading newspapers, 40% of Americans in a 2015 Gallup Poll said they have a “great deal” or “fair amount” of trust and confidence in the media (Riffkin, 2015). In addition, more than 68% of those surveyed in 2013 said news outlets keep politicians from doing things they should not do (Dimock, 2013, p. 1). Sixty-eight percent was up from 57% in 2011 (Dimock, 2013). The time and trust of newspapers is important to examine because, as Graber (1988) asserted, “For many areas of public life, average Americans are totally dependent on media information” (p. 264). One report shows parents (65%) believe standardized tests help inform instruction (Chapman, 2016). Cohen (1963), in his landmark study on coverage of foreign affairs, argued newspaper coverage is more extensive and thorough than television or radio (p. 8). He said other outlets follow the lead of newspapers for news gathering and editing (Cohen, 1963, p. 8). To that end, parents are reliant on newspaper information to learn more about tests and scores.

Implications for District and School Leaders

From this experience, public school leaders should be cautious to protect the image of schools and to be proactive in getting out a positive message. This study suggests much of the information on testing parents and the public get from newspapers is negative. Tyack and Cuban (1995) supported this study’s findings arguing the policy elites “have greater access to the media” (p. 42). Contributors to the discussion say the “public debate about education is largely framed in terms of failure and decline” (Rothstein, 1998, p. v). Berliner and Biddle (1995) argued the attack on public education starting in the 1980s “was waged with great vigor” and was reported by a “compliant

press” (p. 343). As Hogan (2013) found in her study, the prevailing narrative in the media is that schools are “failing.” Emery and Ohanian (2004) said the media parroting of phrases such as “war on terror” and “failing public schools” creates foregone conclusions (p. 6). Considering the negative language about education and testing in this study, Hogan along with Emery and Ohanian’s conclusions have some bearing. Hogan warned administrators to be conscious of the language they use when talking with reporters to describe schools. She continued, suggesting school administrators “partner with the news media to provide the public with access to reliable data and facts about the performance of schools so that they can be evaluated objectively” (Hogan, 2013, p. 69).

A former public school critic echoes much of Hogan’s (2013) research and this study’s findings. Jamie Vollmer’s (2010) book was largely spent on advising educators to quit bashing themselves and each other and to spread a pro-public education message. He suggested using what he calls the “Great Conversation” which costs no money to promote positive talk between educators and their communities (Vollmer, 2010, p. 121). He suggested taking the “Great Conversation” to civic clubs, organizations, fraternal societies, professional associations, labor and farm organizations, ethnic societies, business over a certain size, all local religious institutions, book clubs, retired employee groups, realtor boards, athletic associations, and toastmaster clubs among other suggestions (Vollmer, 2010, pp. 135, 139). He said the message to these groups should draw facts from personal experiences, should move people along the continuum of trust, and should be nonconfrontational (Vollmer, 2010, pp. 146-147).

NCASA (n.d.) suggested taking all avenues to promote public education including

social media, town halls, opinion-editorial pieces for the local newspaper, print media on the back of graduation programs and newsletters, billboards, and television and radio campaigns.

As Hogan (2013), Vollmer (2010), and NCASA (n.d.) suggested, and as this researcher has long believed, discussion of testing and scores must be driven more by the district leaders and educators than by politicians and business leaders. This researcher reasons that each district needs a robust news and public information department to determine the public conversation about education; otherwise, someone else will do the talking.

Limitations and Strengths

A limitation of this study is that editorial letters written by the public were not evaluated. The research took into consideration editorials written by the newspaper staff as they represent the “official” stance of the newspaper on issues; however, an examination including public editorials would be useful.

As is discussed in the suggestions for future research, a western North Carolina newspaper was not included in this study. A lack of representation of articles from the western part of the state is a limitation.

Examination of stories in *The Charlotte Observer* was restricted to articles dealing with North Carolina school systems. Charlotte’s metropolitan area stretches in the neighboring South Carolina, and news coverage at times reaches South Carolina school districts. Since this research focused on North Carolina testing policy and reports, South Carolina was excluded.

Another limitation of this study is that articles were taken from an electronic archive. If the 300 articles could have been pulled from actual newspaper archives or

microfilm, the examination could have included a check of pictures and graphics published with each article. As Smith (1991) explained, photographs, headline size, and other style features help give the reader a focal point.

A strength of this study is that no similar research centering on North Carolina newspapers and the reports on “test scores” could be found. This study charted new territory for content analysis by evaluating the topics in North Carolina newspapers dealing with “test scores.”

Another strength of this study is that the researcher was able to quantify the number of stories that fell into each category. While this provided useful information and insights, the QCA of topics, tone, and the sources gave a depth to the investigation that would not be revealed quantitatively (Creswell, 2014; Krippendorff, 2013; Schreier, 2012).

Suggestions for Further Research

This researcher would suggest that future studies could build on the findings outlined in this analysis by comparing the data with a similar investigation using the most recent years and articles published in North Carolina, which is still heavily invested in state testing. Also, the state now publishes report cards with each school’s grade and mandates that schools and districts publish the scores (NCDPI, n.d.b). The publication of school report cards makes this current study more relevant. This researcher wanted to review several years to determine if the news coverage differed before and after NCLB was passed by Congress and signed into law in 2002. The study did not show significant differences in the years under investigation on topics; however, the number of articles seems to dwindle in later years.

Further research could also examine a western North Carolina newspaper’s

coverage of testing. A newspaper such as *The Citizen Times* of Asheville was not included in this study because electronic archives did not exist in the database America's Newspapers. The first year (1994) was not archived electronically in America's Newspapers for *The Winston-Salem Journal*. A search of that paper's articles for the 1 year under investigation took 4 complete days working with microfilm. Still, a researcher could build upon these findings to determine if coverage in western North Carolina follows the pattern uncovered in this study.

Another topic for research is to determine, perhaps through a statewide survey, where the public gets its information on state testing. An exhaustive and comprehensive search with state polling services could find no such survey. A specific poll could tie together whether the public gets information about testing from newspapers or if people rely on other sources such as districts, teachers, and students.

The Paradox

This researcher believes the paradox that exists in public education may drive today's newspaper reporting. As Fowler (2009) discussed, Horace Mann opened the doors for public tax funding to create secular schools for all students (p. 158); but in doing so, his exams "proved" the former schools were ineffective (Rothstein, 1998). This "proof" allowed Mann to argue for the Common School Movement (Fowler, 2009; Rothstein, 1998). Much of the argument that Mann had to make to push towards universal public education still remains; however, some authors such as Rothstein (1998) offer that today's push towards change is based on a myth. Rothstein claimed that schools are doing a better job than ever but due to lingering talk of failing schools after the 1983 A Nation at Risk report, the perception is schools are not getting the job done. Rothstein offered the NAEP, SAT, and IQ scores as evidence that schools are better than

they were in the “golden” age of the 1950s or even 1960s and 1970s (p. 11).

Beyond performance, Rothstein (1998) and Tyack and Cuban (1995) rejected schools as a business model. For example, Rothstein argued car companies must constantly improve gas mileage, emissions standards, and safety to enhance their product and make more sales (p. 31); but as Tyack and Cuban pointed out, “children are not passive raw materials” and teachers are not operating “assembly lines” (p. 115). Tyack and Cuban argued “Change where it counts the most—in the daily interactions of teachers and students—is the hardest to achieve and the most important” (p. 10).

Rothstein continued,

But school reform is unique in one respect: our political culture cannot seem to proceed to reform education without believing that the present system is failing, that our schools are in crisis, that students are, on the whole, more poorly educated today than in the past. (p. 31)

Still, the drumbeat of improving schools, as reported in newspapers, deals less with programs or plans to actually advance education and more with testing results and the publication of scores. The paradox is the public must be convinced something is wrong in public schools to call for adjustments, but the public gets very little information, based on this study, to make solid educational judgments.

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Appendix

News Coding Sheet

Adapted from Hogan (2013) and Treyens (1997)

Newspaper (Raleigh, Charlotte, Fayetteville, Winston-Salem)

Date:

Headline:

Byline:

Page #:

Word Count:

Topic:

Words or phrases that support the topic:

Tone about education: (positive, negative, neutral)

Tone about testing: (positive, negative, neutral)

Type of test: (EOG, EOC, SAT, ACT, NAEP, IQ, AP, CAT, Iowa, other)

Type of school (Public, private, charter, home, college or university)

Sources: (teachers, school district administrators, parents, students, politicians, union representatives, research or report, school reformer, interested citizens, University professor, researcher, other)

Rhetorical devices:

Researcher notes: