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PROGRAM: PROCESS EVALUATION OF A STATE ALTERNATE
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**THE MICHIGAN MI-ACCESS ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT PROGRAM: PROCESS
EVALUATION OF A STATE ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT SYSTEM**

By

Angela L. Dalhoe

A DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

THE MICHIGAN MI-ACCESS ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT PROGRAM: PROCESS EVALUATION OF A STATE ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

By

Angela L. Dalhoe

The implementation of alternate assessments for students with disabilities is one of the most prominent changes in special education in recent history (Browder, Fallin, Davis, & Karvonen, 2003). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) originally mandated alternate assessments in 1997. Two more pieces of legislation, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002 and the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, supported the importance of assessment and accountability for all students, including those with significant disabilities. Prior to NCLB and IDEA, many students with significant disabilities were excluded from assessment and accountability systems (Ysseldyke & Olsen, 1997). These legal mandates affect approximately eleven percent of the 5.5 million students receiving services under IDEA. Therefore, approximately 610,000 students in the United States are affected by the recent changes in the assessment process for students with significant disabilities (Golden Gate, 2006).

This evaluative study examined the process surrounding the MI-Access alternate assessment program used in Michigan through a web-based survey sent to all MI-Access District Coordinators ($N = 786$). The survey focused on the utilization of data and resources in the implementation of MI-Access, communication and collaboration within and between key stakeholders in the alternate assessment process, and District

Coordinators' perceptions of the MI-Access Program for students with significant disabilities. The research questions guiding this study include:

- To what extent are Michigan School Districts utilizing the MI-Access resources (e.g. assessment data and results and Extended Grade Level Content Expectations) provided by the Michigan Department of Education to improve instruction for students with cognitive impairments?
- To what extent are Michigan School Districts communicating and collaborating to successfully implement and coordinate the MI-Access Program for students with cognitive impairments?
- What are District Coordinators' perceptions regarding the MI-Access Program (i.e. personal role, Assessment Administer training, and perceived strengths and weaknesses of the MI-Access Program)?

Participants completed 23 Likert scale survey items and four open-ended response questions. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze data and report results for each research question. In addition, open-ended responses were coded, categorized, and reported according to frequency and percent of respondents. An overall return rate of 64.4% was achieved with 506 District Coordinators participating in this study.

Overall, findings from this study indicated that alternate assessment data, results, and resources appear to be underutilized by MI-Access District Coordinators. In addition, differences in the level of agreement regarding the alternate assessment process were identified between the Administration and Practitioner subgroups. Specifically, the Administration group reported more agreement in most survey categories.

This work is dedicated to my family:

My husband, Rick for his never-ending encouragement and patience.

My parents, Swede and Rose for a lifetime of support and guidance.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Study

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) originally mandated alternate assessments in 1997. States and districts use these assessments for students who, due to the severity of their disability, are unable to participate in the regular state assessment even if provided the appropriate accommodations (CCSSO, 2003). The need for alternate assessments was further addressed in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 and the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 2004. These regulations stipulate that states must develop alternate assessments that align with grade level standards. While they are not required to do so, many states develop their alternate assessments from a set of alternate achievement standards. According to the US Department of Education, these standards must align with the state's academic content standards, promote access to the general education curriculum, and reflect professional judgment of the highest learning standards possible for students with the most significant disabilities (CCSSO, 2003). The creation of these alternate standards and assessments has increased the participation of students with significant disabilities in state testing and accountability systems.

The process of assessing students with disabilities and including them in accountability systems is important for students, educators, and families. In the school setting, alternate assessments have the potential to promote high expectations for students with disabilities as well as provide access to the general education curriculum (Thurlow, Elliott, & Ysseldyke, 2003). In addition, families and educators can benefit from the

information provided by alternate assessments to determine academic achievement for students with significant disabilities. Results from alternate assessments may also determine whether existing academic programs are meeting the needs of students with significant disabilities. Overall, these assessments have the potential to increase opportunities for students with disabilities and improve educational outcomes (Kleinert & Kearns, 2001)

Early in the process of large-scale assessments, not all students were participating in accountability systems. Originally, students with mild disabilities began to participate and then the movement shifted to include all students. “Special education could no longer focus only on access to and compliance with the educational process, but rather it had to shift to looking at outcomes for students” (Kleinert & Kearns, 2001, p. 3). These students included those with significant cognitive disabilities.

There are numerous reasons for having *all* students, including those with significant disabilities, participate in assessment and accountability systems. These systems have the potential to increase learning expectations and improve access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities (Thurlow et al., 2003). In addition, by including students with significant disabilities in standardized assessments, this population becomes part of national accountability systems such as NCLB’s Adequate Yearly Progress (NCLB 2002).

However, there are also challenges and concerns regarding alternate assessments for students with significant disabilities. Proper administration of alternate assessments requires a considerable commitment of time and resources. Teachers consistently report a lack of instructional and preparation time as an issue in education. This problem is

intensified by the new requirements of alternate assessments. In addition, teachers report needing more resources such as release time, computer access, or assistive technology to meet the demands of alternate assessments (Flowers, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Browder, & Spooner, 2005). Schools and districts will need to provide staff training and professional development opportunities to increase understanding of the alternate assessment process if they are going to demonstrate appropriate assessment administration (Browder, Fallin, Davis, & Karvonen, 2003). Considering the time and resources necessary to implement alternate assessments, some educators are concerned that instruction and curriculum for students with significant disabilities may be negatively affected. Specifically, there is concern that narrowing of the curriculum could potentially reduce the focus on functional and transition skills (Flowers et al., 2005).

There are many new accountability requirements outlined in IDEA 04 and NCLB that impact special education. This new legislation creates challenges for schools as they work with teachers to improve the educational outcomes for students with significant disabilities. Considering the shortage of teachers who work with this population, the struggles are confounded by the fact that many teachers may be learning to work with these students as well as trying to master the components of alternate assessments (Browder, Karvonen, Davis, Fallin, & Courtade-Little, 2005). Organizations such as the Council for Exceptional Children – Developmental Disabilities Division support the inclusion of all students into effective assessment systems, but are concerned with how states “develop and implement assessments that affect students with disabilities” (Perner, 2007, p. 243).

Statement of Problem

The introduction of alternate assessments for students with significant disabilities is a recent addition to the field of special education. The Michigan Department of Education administered the first MI-Access Alternate Assessments in 2002. At this time, there were two levels of alternate assessments titled *Participation* and *Supported Independence*. The Participation assessment is administered to students who have, or function as if they have, severe cognitive impairments. The Supported Independence assessment is developed for students who have, or function as if they have, moderate cognitive impairments (MDE-PSI Assessment Plan, 2007). The *Functional Independence* assessment was introduced during the 2005/2006 school year and administered to students who have, or function as if they have, mild cognitive impairments (MDE-FI Assessment Plan, 2005).

Statewide, there are approximately 3,000 students in each assessment grade (3 through 8, and 11) participating in the MI-Access Program for a total of approximately 21,000 students statewide (MDE-Technical Report, 2007). However, because all three levels of the MI-Access Program have only been operational for two academic years, there has been little research conducted to evaluate this alternate assessment process.

Significance of Process Evaluation

The use of alternate assessments is a new development for most states as they work to meet the federal mandates of NCLB and IDEA. According to NCLB, states have the option to choose an alternate assessment format and develop their own assessments. Currently, about half of states use a portfolio-based assessment to measure academic achievement for students who do not participate in state standardized assessment. Other

states utilize a variety of formats including checklists, IEP analysis, and other performance based models for their alternate assessments (Perner, 2007).

The alternate assessment process in Michigan is relatively unique. In the MI-Access Program, students take an “on-demand” performance based assessment format with items developed specifically for each student population (Participation, Supported Independence, and Functional Independence level). While the assessment administrator has flexibility in the presentation of an assessment item, all items in the assessment booklets are the same throughout the state.

The “on-demand” performance based alternate assessment format also creates a unique assessment process where there are multiple levels of material distribution and communication. According to Gong and Marion (2006), “alternate assessment and instruction is moving more firmly into a standards-based accountability world” (p. 1). This research will evaluate the process of the MI-Access Program as an example of a standardized alternate assessment system.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to conduct evaluative research of the MI-Access Alternate Assessment Program from the perspective of one critical stakeholder, the MI-Access District Coordinator. Guided by the CIPP Model developed by Daniel L. Stufflebeam, this research evaluated the implementation process of the MI-Access Alternate Assessment Program. The CIPP Evaluation Model is a “comprehensive framework for guiding evaluations of programs, projects, personnel, products, institutions, and systems” (Stufflebeam, 2007). This model focuses on the *Context*, *Input*, *Process*, and *Product* of a program. For the purpose of this study, research focused on the

Process of the MI-Access Program. By surveying all MI-Access District Coordinators in Michigan, this research study evaluated the MI-Access Program based on the perceptions of these participants. This evaluation includes the utilization of program resources and data, communication and collaboration, professional development and training, and general knowledge of the MI-Access process.

In addition, this research examined the MI Access Program in relation to the Michigan School Improvement Framework. Specifically, survey questions were categorized into: (1) Strand I – Teaching for Learning, (2) Strand II – Leadership, and (3) Strand III – Personnel and Professional Learning (MDE-School Improvement Framework, 2006).

Overall, the purpose of this study was twofold. First, it evaluated the implementation of the MI-Access Alternate Assessment Program by surveying 506 MI-Access District Coordinators throughout the state. This provided detailed information as to the implementation *process* of the MI-Access Program in Michigan school districts. This information was obtained through Likert scale survey questions to determine the utilization of program resources, communication and collaboration, and professional development during the implementation process.

The second purpose of this study was to allow District Coordinator to provide detailed feedback regarding their experience with the MI-Access Program. This information was collected through open-ended survey questions focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of Michigan's alternate assessment system.

The research questions guiding this study include:

- To what extent are Michigan School Districts utilizing the MI-Access resources (e.g. assessment data and results, released item booklets, and EGLCEs) provided by the Michigan Department of Education to improve instruction for students with cognitive impairments? – Focusing on the Teaching for Learning component of the Michigan School Improvement Framework
- To what extent are Michigan School Districts communicating and collaborating to successfully implement and coordinate the MI-Access Program for students with cognitive impairments? – Focusing on the Leadership and Personnel/Professional learning components of the Michigan School Improvement Framework
- What are District Coordinators' perceptions regarding the MI-Access Program (i.e., personal role, Assessment Administer training, and perceived strengths and weaknesses of the MI-Access Program)?

Significance of Study

This evaluative research was designed to provide insight into the MI-Access Alternate Assessment Program. There are 57 intermediate school districts in Michigan containing more than 550 public school districts and approximately 125,000 students per grade. Of the 125,000 per grade, approximately 3,000 students per grade participate in the Mi-Access Program. In addition, charter schools and students participating in home schooling must be assessed based on state standards (MDE-Technical Report, 2007). An evaluation of the MI-Access Program may provide information to improve the

assessment process for students with significant disabilities both in Michigan as well as in other states.

Referring to the CIPP Model Checklist components for Process Evaluation, this research evaluated, documented, and assessed program activities. Specifically, these components included (a) “using the process evaluation findings to coordinate and strengthen staff activities,” (b) “using the process evaluation findings to strengthen the program design,” and (c) “using the process evaluation findings to report on the program’s progress to the program’s financial sponsor, policy board, community members, other developers, etc” (Stufflebeam, 2007). Results from this research may influence multiple stakeholders involved with the MI-Access Program and provide information to improve the alternate assessment process.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter is designed to review the literature related to the process of alternate assessments for students with significant disabilities. The first section focuses on the definition and types of alternate assessments followed by the rationale for developing and implementing alternate assessments systems. The next two sections address the perceived advantages and disadvantages of alternate assessments at the student, teacher, and district level. The fifth and sixth sections discuss the change process and policy implementation regarding alternate assessments. The final sections focus specifically on the development and purpose of the Michigan MI-Access Program as well as a brief overview of the Michigan School Improvement Framework including its purpose and relevance to the assessment process.

The implementation of alternate assessments for students with disabilities is one of the most prominent changes in special education in recent history (Browder, Fallin, et al., 2003). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) originally mandated alternate assessments in 1997. Two more pieces of legislation, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act of 2002 and the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, supported the importance of assessment and accountability for all students, including those with significant disabilities. Prior to NCLB and IDEA, many students with significant disabilities were excluded from assessment and accountability systems (Ysseldyke & Olsen, 1997). These legal mandates affect approximately eleven percent of the 5.5 million students receiving services under IDEA. Therefore, approximately 610,000 students in the United States are

affected by the recent changes in the assessment process for students with significant disabilities (Golden Gate, 2006).

What are Alternate Assessments?

In the U.S. government publication, *Title I – Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged; Final Rule* (2003), the Department of Education defines alternate assessments as:

An assessment designed for the small number of students with disabilities who are unable to participate in the regular State assessment, even with appropriate accommodations. An alternate assessment may include materials collected under several circumstances, including (1) teacher observation of the student, (2) samples of student work produced during regular classroom instruction that demonstrate mastery of specific instructional strategies in place of performance on a computer-scored multiple-choice test covering the same content and skills, or (3) standardized performance tasks produced in an “on-demand” setting, such as completion of an assigned task on test day. To serve the purposes of assessment under title I, an alternate assessment must be aligned with the State's content standards, must yield results separately in both reading/language arts and mathematics, and must be designed and implemented in a manner that supports use of the results as an indicator of AYP.

Types of Alternate Assessments. There are three main types of alternate assessments including portfolio, checklists, and performance-based formats. Portfolio assessments consist of a collection of student work that represents their performance on designated skills or academic content. Checklist assessments use a predetermined list of

performance activities that represent specific skills or academic content. An individual who is familiar with the student then scores their performance based on a predetermined scale. The third type of alternate assessment is a performance-based model. Performance-based models consist of a set of items or activities, which are the same for all students taking the assessment. Assessment administrators score the students based on their performance or response to each item (Flowers et al., 2005).

The Alternate Assessment Process and Educational Improvements

Why Use Alternate Assessments? Under IDEA, all states were required to implement an alternate Assessment by July 1, 2000. In addition, The Office of Elementary and Secondary Education notified all states in the spring of 2000 to inform them of the Title I assessment requirements. This included the requirement that all students with disabilities participate in statewide assessment and accountability systems with modifications to the general assessment, or by taking an alternate assessment. Since that time, states have been required to include the scores of all students with disabilities in their assessment reporting for district and public purposes (U.S. Department of Education - Title I, 2003).

The primary purpose of alternate assessments, as well as large-scale assessments for the general education population, is accountability. As with other State administered assessments, alternate assessments provide results that reflect the state content standards and demonstrate educational performance for students, schools, and states (Quenemoen, Rigney, & Thurlow, 2002). Including students with significant disabilities in accountability systems through meaningful alternate assessments is widely supported by

teachers, parents and educational associations such as the Council for Exceptional Children (Perner, 2007).

Thurlow et al. (2003) identify several specific reasons for including all students in educational accountability systems. These include:

1. To obtain an accurate picture of education. Students with disabilities make up a significant portion of the student population. In order to better understand and interpret student performance, all students must be included in school, district, and state accountability systems.

2. To allow students with disabilities to benefit from reform. Educational reforms are often based on the results from accountability systems. If students with significant disabilities are not included in these systems, the reform process may overlook their individual needs.

3. To make accurate comparisons. Within states, there is considerable variation in the number of students with disabilities who participate in assessment systems. If states include all students, regardless of ability level, it would increase the accuracy of comparisons regarding educational achievement.

4. To promote high expectations and access to the general education curriculum. By including students with disabilities in accountability systems, educators are sending a message that all students can learn and benefit from academic standards. In order to do this, students with disabilities will need to have access to, not just participation in, the general education curriculum. According to McGrew and Evans (2004), “The silent, subjective shifting [toward lower] evidentiary academic standards [for students with disabilities] represents a subtle, yet potentially potent force operating against the goal of

‘leaving no child behind’” (p. 22). Access to the general education curriculum and participation in standardized assessments has the potential to slow this shift toward low academic standards.

Hehir (2005) suggests several “policy imperatives” for improving the outcomes for students with disabilities including the support of standards based reform and holding states accountable for improving educational results for students with disabilities. However, there also needs to be continued research focusing on how to teach academic skills to students with significant, complex, or multiple disabilities. Research can be important in determining the most effective methods for students with significant disabilities to demonstrate learning in academic content as well as progress on state content standards (Browder & Cooper-Duffy, 2003).

Perceived Advantages of Alternate Assessments

High Expectations for All Students. This can seem like an overwhelming or “unrealistic” task for students with the most severe disabilities. However, it is important to not underestimate or assume the academic capabilities of students with significant disabilities (Browder, Fallin, et al., 2003). Thomas Hehir (2005) states that many disability advocates view standards-based reforms as “holding great promise to help eradicate the most insidious ableist assumption: that people with disabilities are no intellectually capable” (p. 112). By excluding students from assessment systems, the status quo of low expectations is perpetuated. Now that all students are required by law to participate, there is evidence indicating that students with disabilities are having more educational success. This includes not only higher expectations for learning, but also

improved instruction and increased collaboration between special and general education teachers (Hehir, 2005).

The most common ableist assumption is that individuals with disabilities are not intellectually capable of learning. For this reason, many advocates feel that standards based reform will be beneficial for this population. By including these students in accountability and assessment programs, more focus is placed on quality programming (Hehir, 2005). In addition, with the introduction of alternate assessments, the field of special education is focusing more on curriculum than it has in the past. This change has required special education teachers to increase their collaboration with professionals in the general education setting. This change assists in setting high expectations for students with significant disabilities as they work toward state standards (Jackson, 2005).

Schools are now accountable for the learning of all students and are required to include their results into district and state accountability measures. With the implementation of recent accountability legislation, the IEP now determines *how* the student will participate in assessment systems rather than *if* they will participate (Quenemoen & Thurlow, 2007). By including these students in school achievement measures, it has brought about a new understanding of what they can achieve with the proper educational opportunities. "It is important for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities to be included in statewide assessments and accountability. The scores of these students make a difference. These students count" (Quenemoen & Thurlow, p. 9)

Access to Grade-Level General Education Curriculum. Throughout history, the educational opportunities for students with significant disabilities have been improving.

In the 1980s, functional and life skill curriculum showed increased levels of independence with home and community living. In the 1990s, inclusion with non-disabled peers brought to light the importance of communication and social interaction for this population (Browder, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Dezell, et al., 2003). More recently, through the implementation of new legislation, teachers have again realized the possibilities for these students by guaranteeing them access to the general education curriculum. Students with significant disabilities are now using curriculum and assessments that are aligned to age-appropriate content standards (Quenemoen & Thurlow, 2007).

IDEA requires that students with disabilities be allowed to participate and make progress in the general education curriculum. These requirements focus on the inclusion of students with disabilities into general education as well as raising the expectations for their learning. Historically, expectations for students with significant disabilities have demonstrated a low standard, which makes this change one of significance (Agran, Alper, & Wehmeyer, 2002). Unfortunately, the resources available for students with disabilities to access the general education curriculum can vary widely based on geographic location. This in turn may influence the outcomes of alternate assessments. According to Jackson (2005), “access to, participation in, and progress within the general curriculum is a tall order indeed, further exacerbated by ambiguity in the definition of the general curriculum” (p. 37).

The process of providing access to the general education curriculum recognizes that students with significant disabilities can benefit and learn from both functional as well as academic instruction (Courtade-Little & Browder, 2005). In addition, the process

and implementation of alternate assessments does not require a shift from “functional” to “general” curriculum for students with significant disabilities (Browder et al., 2004). In reality, the expansion of grade level content standards allows numerous “entry points” where students with varying degrees of ability can access and learn from the general education curriculum. Furthermore, progress on IEP goals or functional skill assessments are not legal measures of achievement under NCLB accountability systems. The measures implemented by IDEA and NCLB regarding participation in assessment systems make schools accountable for the academic achievement of all students, regardless of their disability (Quenemoen & Thurlow, 2007).

It is important to address the role of teachers in the implementation of access to the general education curriculum. Their attitudes and beliefs regarding accountability systems for students with disabilities can influence the process and outcomes of alternate assessments. A study conducted by Agran et al. (2002) focused on Iowa teachers certified in the instruction of students who had moderate, severe, and profound disabilities. This research found that the majority of students with disabilities were regularly participating in general education but little effort was made to provide access to the general education curriculum. In addition, the majority of teachers in this study agreed that access to the general education curriculum would increase learning expectations even though they were not currently providing this opportunity

The Agran et al. (2002) study also found that most of the teachers did not believe accessing the general education curriculum was appropriate for students with severe disabilities (it was more appropriate for students with mild disabilities). Based on this belief, teachers also reported that this student population should not be held to the same

standards as their non-disabled peers. Despite the legislation to ensure participation and access to the general education curriculum for all students, those with severe disabilities are often not considered to benefit from this commitment (Agran et al., 2002).

Often, characteristics of a student's disability become the focus of their education rather than access to the curriculum (Hehir, 2005). The purpose of all students having access to the general education curriculum is to ensure that students with disabilities are held to high expectations, have an education based on a challenging curriculum, and are included in assessment and accountability systems (Agran et al., 2002). However, it is unlikely that students with significant disabilities will benefit from access to the general education curriculum unless it is made a part of their regular instruction (Browder, Fallin, et al., 2003).

The Standards Based Individualized Education Program (IEP). As stated previously, the IEP team decides how, not if, the student will participate in state assessments. In addition, the IEP is an important tool to reach academic achievement as well as assessment proficiency. While the methods of alternate assessment vary between states, each model offers students with significant disabilities the right to participate in state accountability systems as well as demonstrate their level of educational achievement in academic content areas (Quenemoen & Thurlow, 2007). A well aligned IEP, which is one that is aligned with state standards and assessments, can promote meaningful and effective academic instruction for students with significant disabilities (Courtade-Little & Browder, 2005).

There is relatively little research and literature in the area of standards based IEPs (Ahearn, 2006). Recent legislation is increasing the need for alignment in instruction,

curriculum and assessment (Courtade-Little & Browder, 2005). The 1997 amendments to IDEA demonstrated the movement toward higher expectations for students with disabilities through access to the general education curriculum and standards. The legislation stated, “over 20 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by having high expectations for such children and ensuring their access to the general curriculum to the maximum extent possible” (IDEA 1997). The 2004 amendments to IDEA added “in the regular classroom” to this statement further supporting the need for access to the general education curriculum (IDEIA 2004). NCLB (2002) provided more support to the idea of aligning the IEP to state standards by requiring that students with disabilities be included in state accountability systems.

Current practices are moving toward the alignment of the IEP to state standards in order to meet the requirements of IDEA and NCLB. However, there is no definition of either ‘general education curriculum’ or ‘accessing curriculum’ in either piece of legislation. All states are responsible for developing methods for IEP development as well as guidelines as to how students with significant disabilities will receive access to the general education curriculum (Ahearn, 2006).

The idea of access to the general education curriculum for students with significant disabilities is not attempting to bypass the IEP goals, but rather to align the IEP goals to the standards of the general education curriculum (Agran et al., 2002). The introduction of alternate assessments for students with significant disabilities has influenced the development of the IEP. In the past, the IEP may have focused on an entirely different set of skills or curriculum than that used in the general education

setting. However, with the current changes in accountability and assessment systems, the IEP should now include goals that align to state standards. By focusing on a standards based IEP, students with significant disabilities will have more access to the general education curriculum and improved outcomes on state assessments (Courtade-Little & Browder, 2005).

For students with significant disabilities, these IEP goals will most likely be derived from an alternate set of content standards or expectations. Alternate content standards reflect the grade level content standards through a reduction in depth, breadth, and complexity. In Michigan, the Grade Level Content Expectations (GLCEs) are reduced in density to create the Extended Grade Level Content Expectations (EGLCEs). Students with significant disabilities are assessed based on the EGLCEs for their grade level (MDE - Technical Report, 2007). From these EGLCEs, educators can create a standards based IEP.

In a study conducted by Ahearn (2006), researchers interviewed special education representatives from 18 different states. Overall, there was strong agreement for continued professional development regarding the use of state standards in the IEP. In addition, it was noted that general education should also be involved in the process as they represent the content areas and can assist with the goals and expectations. One state, Alabama, noted in its training materials that “developing an effective standards-based IEP is the cornerstone of access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities” (Ahearn, p. 11).

Benefits from the process of standards based IEP development include the elimination of separate curriculum for students with disabilities, higher than anticipated

levels of achievement for this population, and more recognizable goals for parents and general education teachers (Ahearn, 2006). Towles-Reeves and Kleinert (2007) also concluded from a study examining the impact of alternate assessments on instruction and IEP development that alternate assessments positively influenced instruction and, to a lesser degree, IEP development. However, every state addresses standards-based IEPs differently and there is no established method for implementation (Ahearn, 2006).

Perceived Disadvantages of Alternate Assessments

Time and Resources Needed for Administration. The introduction of alternate assessments for students with significant disabilities has created a resource demand on teachers and school districts. Teachers have expressed frustration over the amount of time needed to administer alternate assessments (Browder, Fallin, et al., 2003). The lack of instructional and preparation time has been reported as an issue for teachers in the past, and it has been intensified by the new requirements of alternate assessments. In addition, teachers need more resources available in order to meet the demands of alternate assessments such as release time, computer access, or assistive technology for this unique population of students (Flowers et al., 2005).

In order to meet the requirements of appropriate assessment administration, schools and districts will need to provide additional staff training and professional development opportunities to increase understanding of the alternate assessment process. This is especially important due to the impact of instruction and curriculum on the outcomes of alternate assessments. In addition, if teachers are not properly prepared or if they are confused as to the connection between assessment, instruction, and the standards

as outlined in the IEP, the administration of alternate assessments may be compromised (Browder, Fallin, et al., 2003).

Proficiency and Adequate Yearly Progress. As well as a reduction of instructional time, the possibility of meaningless results is also considered a disadvantage of alternate assessments. Early in the alternate assessment process, states may experience low levels of assessment proficiency for students with significant disabilities. This can potentially lead to lower achievement expectations for students with disabilities and negative attitude toward the alternate assessment process (Browder, Fallin, et al., 2003).

NCLB requires all students to meet the same proficiency level of 100% by the year 2014 regardless of the previous level of functioning and or social factors. While students with significant disabilities are allowed to participate in alternate assessments, the same expectation for proficiency applies based on alternate achievement standards (U.S. Department of Education - Alternate Achievement Standards, 2005). This can be challenging due to the complexities of this student population. Within the label of “cognitively impaired” or “mental retardation”, students can have IQs of below 20 (profound CI) to almost 70 (mild CI) (Ainsworth & Baker, 2004). For students with profound mental retardation, changes in academic performance may be minimal to nonexistent. By the NCLB definition, these students would be failing to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) solely because of their disability.

NCLB also stipulates that all states report student scores in the areas of English Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science for the calculation of AYP. No matter what the outcome of these assessments, only 1% of all student enrollment for tested grades can be counted as “proficient” using alternate assessments. This factor can have negative

implications on proficiency reporting under NCLB. For example, if a district has more than 1% of their students taking alternate assessments, any number over the 1% cannot be counted as “proficient” in district reporting even if they receive that score on the alternate assessment. While these students would be considered assessed, they would not count toward AYP (Flowers et al., 2005). Because of this stipulation, it is possible that some individuals may feel as though students with significant disabilities are “bringing down” the level of performance within a district.

The regulations set by NCLB have created challenges in determining the appropriate inclusion for students with disabilities. All scores from alternate assessments (up to 1%) must be included in AYP reporting. Unless an exception has been granted, any proficient scores that exceed the 1% cap must be counted as non-proficient against grade-level standards. Determining how to distribute the scores that are over the 1% cap and separating them among subgroups can be a challenging and time-consuming task (Martinez & Olsen, 2004). In addition, the fact that some proficient scores will be reported as failing is often seen as unfair and irresponsible. In the Golden Gate University Law Review *"No Child Left Behind" In need of a New 'IDEA' "* (2006), the author noted that “NCLB-required assessments arguably violate the equal protection rights of students with disabilities” and undermines the principles of equal protection that were put in place by IDEA” (p. 176).

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) provided the following information regarding the 1% cap in their *Summary and Analysis of the U.S. Department of Education's Final Regulations on Alternate Assessment Standards and Alternate Assessments under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (2003):

For students taking alternate assessments aligned to alternate achievement standards, the final regulations establish a 1.0 percent cap on the number of proficient and advanced scores that may count toward AYP. This cap applies to AYP determinations for States and districts, but does not apply at the school level. This cap also does not affect the number of students who may be administered alternate assessments. (Decisions regarding whether students with disabilities are to be assessed with alternate assessments remain with IEP teams based on State criteria.) The 1.0 percent cap may be exceeded in cases where States and districts can provide appropriate justifications

Process. The federal requirements for alternate assessments are extensive. The most recent reauthorization of IDEA (2004) reflected the federal governments' intentions of aligning this legislation with the existing requirements of NCLB. IDEA requires that states develop alternate assessments, but provides little guidance for the process. This creates confusion as to how states will receive funding under this legislation. In addition, the goals of NCLB and IDEA may be viewed as contradictory. NCLB clearly stipulates high expectations for all students and assessments based on grade-level content standards. However, IDEA requires schools to provide education in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and to personalize the educational programs for students with disabilities via an Individualized Educational Program (IEP). This contradiction creates confusion at the state and school level regarding the needs of the students and the mandates of the law. "Ultimately, the Department of Education levies penalties against states as they attempt to hit a moving federal target" (Golden Gate, 2006, p. 164).

In April 2005, the U.S. Department of Education added the 2% policy related to modified achievement standards to NCLB. This created more uncertainty and confusion regarding states' role in the development of federally approved assessments. There are continued requirements enforced by threats of peer reviews and penalties. Many states and districts challenge NCLB because they are required to implement this legislation without adequate support or guidance. NCLB requires alternate assessments, but does not define them. This legislation also fails to define the students who make up the 1% and 2% testing groups (Golden Gate, 2006).

Changing Curriculum and Philosophies. The change in curriculum from “functional” to an “access to the general education” approach may be seen as having both positive and negative implications for students with significant disabilities. In order for students to make progress on state standards and alternate assessments, they need to have instruction that is based on the general education curriculum (Browder, Fallin, et al., 2003). However, some professionals believe there are negative consequences of alternate assessments for students with significant disabilities including a narrowing of the curriculum that could potentially reduce the focus on functional and transition skills (Flowers et al., 2005).

The current educational focus on “access to the general education curriculum” for students with significant disabilities represents both an instructional and philosophical change. Prior to this movement, and still very common in classrooms around the country, students with significant disabilities were provided functional curriculum with the addition of social inclusion opportunities (Browder et al., 2003). This type of curriculum and instruction practice has been in place since the early 1980's when Lou Brown defined

functional skills as the “variety of skills that are frequently demanded in natural domestic, vocational, and community environments” and nonfunctional skills as those that have very little chance of being used in daily activities. Brown also emphasized the importance of determining how often a skill is used in natural environments and whether it contributes to the students’ independent functioning (Brown et al., 1979). This instructional philosophy set the standard for the education of students with significant disabilities. The change to an academic, or access to the general education curriculum model, may be very difficult for some teachers.

While change is often a positive, the process can create confusion and anxiety. Michael Fullan notes that educational change is multidimensional and needs to be considered as such. There are at least three components involved with any instructional/educational innovation. They include changes in materials, teaching approaches, and beliefs, which together comprise a change in practice (Fullan, 2001). The recent change in educational practices for students with significant disabilities represents a substantial philosophical shift. This could have negative consequences for schools when considering the effort needed for this type of reform. According to Fullan’s requirements for a change, teachers would have to deal with several issues. In order to provide access to the general education curriculum, teachers would need to work with new materials (general education content and standards), apply new teaching approaches (collaborating with general education teachers), and change beliefs (the shift from functional skill philosophy to academic curriculum).

Finally, it can be difficult to track the educational progress of students with significant disabilities on state standards, which can make the “access to general

education model” even more challenging to teachers. In addition, assessments that are performance based may not provide an accurate picture of the student’s academic capability because some students with significant disabilities face many risk factors that can affect their performance on alternate assessments. These include variations in behavior and multiple health conditions that have the potential to vary dramatically from day to day (Browder, Fallin, et al., 2003). These additional factors may make the recent changes in curriculum and assessment for students with significant disabilities seem inappropriate to many teachers in the field.

The Change Process and Teacher Attitudes

Teachers’ attitudes regarding student ability (and disability) can influence the quality of education they receive (Hehir, 2005). This influence can in turn affect instruction and the outcomes of assessments. Research has shown that teachers’ attitudes regarding alternate assessments and student ability are conflicting. For example, Flowers et al. (2005) conducted a study involving multiple states ($n = 5$) and the use of alternate assessments. In this study, half of the teachers felt that it was appropriate to have students with significant disabilities included in accountability systems, but only a small percent believed that these students receive an overall better education because of this requirement. In addition, the responses indicated that teachers did not feel as though alternate assessments were meeting the original intentions for students, teachers, and schools as outlined in IDEA 1997. More than half of the teachers in this study reported that their states had set high expectations for students with significant disabilities, but less agreed that their students could meet these requirements (Flowers et al., 2005)

There is significant variation within the disability label of “cognitive impairment” or “mental retardation” (Ainsworth & Baker, 2004). The severity of the disability may also play a role in how teachers acknowledge, instruct, and assess students with significant disabilities. McGrew & Evans (2004) noted that the Attribution Theory demonstrates teachers’ tendencies “to attribute success or failure for an individual (e.g. students) to one of two different characteristics – ability or effort.” Students with lower ability levels tend to elicit pity from teachers, which increases the expectation of future failure. Teachers who viewed their students as having lower ability levels were more likely to expect continued failure as opposed to teachers who believed that the failure was caused by lack of effort. This type of “expectation of failure” has the potential to impact the implementation of standards based reform and the alternate assessment process for students with significant disabilities.

In addition, ability can be viewed from a “trait-oriented” or “process-oriented” system. The trait-oriented system believes that student ability is relatively fixed whereas the process-oriented system views ability as something that can be increased with increased effort and learning strategies. Teachers who view ability as fixed can display attitudes that have a negative impact on student learning (McGrew & Evans, 2004). When administering alternate assessments to students with significant disabilities, some teachers believe that this method demonstrates more of the teachers ability than that of their students (Flowers et al., 2005).

Policy Implementation and Evaluation

The implementation of educational policy has a direct affect on school districts. Without proper policy implementation, many schools may feel “adrift among the

tumultuous waves of change and reform” (Masci, Cuddapah, & Pujack, p. 57, 2008). A conceptual framework for program or practice implementation was outlined in a recent National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) publication. This publication, titled *Implementation of Research: A Synthesis of the Literature*, focused on the research surrounding this important element of program change. The framework included five components in the implementation process: (a) a source, (b) a destination, (c) a communication link, (d) a feedback mechanism, and (d) a sphere of influence for operation (NIRN, 2008). When considering alternate assessments, the source of implementation comes from the State Departments of Education. The final destination is at the school level with services being provided to students with significant disabilities. The Communication link, specifically in MI-Access, is the District Coordinators who are responsible for the reliable implementation of the alternate assessment program. Finally, the feedback mechanism focuses on collecting information about the implementation from those who play an integral part of the process (i.e. District Coordinators and Assessment Administrators). According to the conceptual framework outlined by the NIRN, all of this exists within a sphere of influence, which in the case of alternate assessments, is the legislative policy of NCLB and IDEA that surround the implementation.

This evaluative research study focused on the feedback mechanism component in the policy implementation of MI-Access, which represents a major shift in educational policy through the reauthorizations of IDEA (1997 and 2004). This change in policy also represents a change in learning expectations. Schools are not only expected to provide access to education for students with disabilities, but this access must create improvements in academic outcomes based on the general education curriculum

(Hardman & Dawson, 2008). While students with disabilities have always been assessed in some capacity, their inclusion into high stakes accountability systems is a new addition to the field of Special Education.

The policy regarding alternate assessments for students with significant disabilities and its implementation affects many areas of special education. IDEA (2004) identifies that the education for students with disabilities will be more effective “by ensuring their access to the general education curriculum in the regular classroom, to the maximum extent possible.” This represents a change in instructional philosophy, curriculum, and ultimately assessment for this student population. Masci et al. (2008) note that the extensiveness, pace, and “top-down imposition” of educational change can lead to cynicism and resistance from many teachers. According to Fullan (2001), implementation is affected by how a change process is introduced and the extent to which it is carried out. Therefore, the role districts play in the process of policy implementation can have an effect on the overall outcomes.

Change at this level is systemic in the sense that it completely alters the assessment process for students with significant disabilities. It also affects the educational philosophy surrounding the instruction of this student population. In order for this type of change to be successful and the policy to be implemented correctly, those involved in the process must “buy into” the change and the outcomes it represents (Duffy, 2008; NIRN, 2008). When considering alternate assessments, one of the main stakeholders in the process is the classroom teacher. The policy requirements from IDEA (2004) and NCLB (2002) require access to the general education curriculum for this population in addition to the introduction of alternate assessments. The classroom teacher plays a significant

role in both of these actives. However, the teachers' perspective is often missing from the area of educational research and change (Ohi, 2008) making it more of a mandated, than self-created process. Louis, Febey, and Schroeder (2005) noted that when educators encounter a new policy, their understanding of its purpose and goals will determine the type of change that follows the implementation. It appears logical to assume that self-created vs. mandated change would create more understanding and in turn, more motivation for change.

This exclusion of teachers in policy implementation can create negative implications. It is important that education policies “empower teachers to teach and students to learn” (Kelly, 2007) which requires the involvement of the classroom teacher to improve success. However, amidst the increasing policy mandates surrounding assessment and accountability systems, Reeves (2006) noted that “educators are drowning under the weight of initiative fatigue - attempting to use the same amount of time, money, and emotional energy to accomplish more and more objectives...eventually, each initiative added to the pile creates a dramatic decline in organizational effectiveness” (pg. 89). The policies surrounding assessment and accountability for students with disabilities continue to be enforced and monitored under IDEA and NCLB. The manner in which states and school districts implement these policies will undoubtedly affect the role of the classroom teacher as well as other professionals who are responsible for improving the educational outcomes for students with disabilities.

MI-Access

Prior to the creation of MI-Access, the only assessment option in Michigan was the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP). This assessment was created for the general education population and addresses Michigan's Grade Level Content Expectations (GLCEs). Even with accommodations, the MEAP is not appropriate for students with significant disabilities (MDE - Technical Report, 2007).

Currently, the state of Michigan uses an alternate assessment system titled *MI-Access*. MI-Access is a performance-based alternate assessment for students who have, or function as if they have cognitive impairments. The IEP team is responsible for determining which MI-Access Assessment a student should take. The MI-Access Program uses a standardized set of assessment instruments that assess the areas of English Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science. Within each content area, students are given a performance level of *surpassed* the performance standard, *attained* the performance standard or *emerging* toward the performance standard (MDE - Technical Report, 2007).

Michigan implemented MI-Access statewide in 2002 and it currently consists of three separate assessments that address the varying ability levels of students with significant disabilities (see Appendix A). MI-Access refers to the first assessment as *Functional Independence*. This assessment is administered to students who have, or function as if they have, mild cognitive impairments. The second assessment is *Supported Independence* and is appropriate for students who have, or function as if they have, moderate cognitive impairments. The third and final MI-Access assessment is

referred to as *Participation* and this assessment is specifically for students who have, or function as if they have, severe cognitive impairments (MDE - Technical Report, 2007).

Even though Michigan has administered the MI-Access Participation and Supported Independence assessments (P/SI) statewide since 2002, the U.S. Department of Education notified the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) in June 2006 that the assessments were not meeting the requirements of NCLB. Specifically, the P/SI assessments did not explicitly measure Michigan's English language arts (ELA) and mathematics content standards and/or report scores separately by content area (MDE – Technical Report, 2007). Due to the recommendations from the U.S. Department of Education, Michigan piloted a new alternate assessment during the Fall of 2006 for operational use in the spring of 2007. The MDE referred to this new assessment as the *MI-Access Participation and Supported Independence v1.5 (P/SI v1.5) Mathematics and English Language Arts Pilot Assessment*. While the title of this pilot assessment combines Participation and Supported Independence, it actually consists of two unique assessments that are administered to separate student populations. As discussed earlier, the MDE developed the Participation assessment for students with severe cognitive impairments while the Supported Independence assessment is appropriate for students who have moderate cognitive impairments.

Prior to the P/SI v1.5 assessment, Michigan students with moderate and severe cognitive impairments were administered assessments that measured their level of participation in a particular task. For example, an assessment item may include: “*The student will participate in a reading activity*” or “*The student will participate in a group activity with peers*”. This type of assessment item was open to interpretation by the

assessment administrator and allowed flexibility to connect the assessment item to classroom instruction. If the student actively “participated” in the assessment activity, the item was scored as correct. However, NCLB has mandated that states measure progress for all students, including those with significant disabilities, in the academic content areas of English Language arts, mathematics, and science (Browder et al., 2005). In Michigan, the new alternate assessments required assessment administrators to present the student with a specific test item that represents an academic content expectation. They also require a correct answer to each item and do not allow “the student participated” as an scoring option (see Appendix B for scoring rubric).

The MI-Access P/SI v1.5 alternate assessments also introduced a new question format for students with moderate and severe cognitive impairments. As required by NCLB, these new assessments reflected Michigan’s Grade Level Content Expectations (GLCEs) and High School Benchmarks. For students with cognitive impairments, these GLCEs and Benchmarks were “extended” to reflect the learning styles and abilities of this population. The MDE created this document by reducing the depth, breadth, and complexity of the general education content standards for students with cognitive impairments (see Appendix C for sample page). The result was a set of Extended Grade Level Content Expectations (EGLCEs) and Extended Benchmarks (EBs) that are guided by the same learning expectations that Michigan has in place for the general education population (MDE - Technical Report, 2007). From these EGLCEs and EBs, the Michigan Department of Education – Office of Education Assessment and Accountability (MDE-OEAA) and Assessment Plan Writing Teams (APWT) worked to develop the

current P/SI assessment items that specifically reflect the Extended Grade Level Content Expectations in the areas of ELA and mathematics.

Michigan School Improvement Framework

In 2003, The Michigan Department of Education established the Office of School Improvement (OSI) to “promote student learning and achievement by providing statewide leadership, guidance and support over a wide range of programs that directly impact teaching and learning, school leadership and continuous [sic] school improvement” (MDE-OSI, 2007). Michigan’s OSI has worked with specialists and educators to develop the *Michigan School Improvement Framework*. This framework is based on best practices and research in the improvement of school and district educational systems.

Every year, schools and districts take time to review their policies and practices with the hope of improving student achievement (MDE - School Improvement Framework, 2006). Specifically, the Michigan School Improvement Framework, v.1.6.06, (2006) states:

This process, commonly referred to as the school improvement process, is deeply embedded in building, district and state planning and accountability systems, and has become an integral and necessary part of school and system reform. While this type of planning has existed for many years, recent state and federal mandates including annual testing directives and increased accountability have intensified the importance of this process and its outcomes...Schools and districts use these plans as a blueprint to establish goals and objectives that will guide teaching for learning, resource allocation, staff development, data management and

assessment. They also use it to measure their ability to meet the goals and objectives established in the plan.

The Michigan School Improvement Framework presents a strong focus on assessment and references the term in three of the five Strands. In addition, the Revised School Code of Michigan, Act 451 of 1976 Section 380.1277 referencing the School Improvement Plan, states that “development of alternative measures of assessment that will provide authentic assessment of pupils achievements, skills, and competencies” (Act 451, 1997). The Framework represents current research and best practice to support continuous school improvement. The emphasis placed on assessment (i.e., utilization of data, knowledge of process, stakeholder communication, and resource allocation) was integral in developing the survey questions for this evaluative study.

Conclusion

Alternate assessments have a significant impact on the education for students with disabilities and research in this area continues to advance (Flowers et al., 2005). The focus on standards-based reform has highlighted the issues of academic content standards, access to the general education curriculum, and appropriate assessments for students with disabilities for the field of special education (Kearns, Lewis, Hall, & Kleinert, 2007). However, there needs to be increased research on the process, effectiveness, and outcomes of these assessments in order to ensure that all students, including those with significant disabilities, can benefit from the recent changes in education (Browder, Fallin, et al., 2003).

The purpose of this study was to conduct evaluative research focusing on the MI-Access Alternate Assessment Program from the perspective of one critical stakeholder,

the MI-Access District Coordinator. By surveying all MI-Access District Coordinators in Michigan, this research study evaluated the MI-Access Program based on the perceptions of these participants. This evaluation included the utilization of program resources and data, communication and collaboration, professional development and training, and knowledge of the MI-Access process.

In addition, this study examined the process of the MI-Access Program in relation to the Michigan School Improvement Framework. Specifically, the three Strands that address assessment including: (1) Strand I – Teaching for Learning, (2) Strand II – Leadership, and (3) Strand III – Personnel and Professional Learning. (MDE - School Improvement Framework, 2006). The purpose of this Framework is to “promote student learning and achievement by providing statewide leadership” (MDE-OSI, 2007). In addition, the Revised School Code of Michigan, Act 451 of 1976 Section 380.1277 referencing the School Improvement Plan, states that “development of alternative measures of assessment that will provide authentic assessment of pupils achievements, skills, and competencies” (Act 451, 1997). However, because there is no reference to alternate assessments or Extended Grade Level Content Expectations (EGLCEs) in the Michigan School Improvement Framework, and because of the limited research in this developing area, this study provides important information in understanding the alternate assessment process for students with significant disabilities.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This evaluative study was designed to examine the *process* of the MI-Access Alternate Assessment Program used in Michigan. Program evaluation is intended to examine existing programs in order to “make recommendations for programmatic refinement and success” (Spaulding, 2008, pg.5). This study utilized a web-based survey tool to investigate MI-Access District Coordinators’ responses regarding this process. District Coordinators play an important role in the alternate assessment process and their feedback was the basis for this research. This chapter presents the methodological rationale, participants, survey development, survey instrument, pilot survey, data collection, and data analysis.

Methodological Rationale

Guba and Lincoln (1989) noted, “evaluation is an investment in people and in progress” (p.3). The purpose in selecting an evaluative research methodology was to focus on the process of the MI-Access Program as it functions within the organizational context of Michigans’ school districts. Evaluative research examines the practice of a program and has the potential to identify possible improvements or changes in the implementation process (IAR, 2007). According to Quenemoen et al. (2002), “we have had at least a half a century to fine-tune how to assess ‘average’ students, but only a few years to devote to a similar development process for students with complex disabilities” (p. 2). By examining the process of Michigan’s MI-Access Program, this study will add to a limited research base in the area of alternate assessments.

It is important to reiterate that the methodological approach of evaluative research in this study will assess the *process* of the MI Access alternate assessment rather than the assessment *content*. By definition, evaluation “is the systematic acquisition and assessment of information to provide useful feedback about some object” (Trochim, 2006). In this definition, Trochim uses the term “object” to refer to any type of policy, program, activity, etc. This study collected information from MI-Access District Coordinators with the intention of providing “useful feedback” to better understand and possibly improve the alternate assessment system used in Michigan.

As discussed earlier, NCLB (2002) and the reauthorization of IDEA (2004) address the need for alternate assessments in order to include all students in state accountability systems. These assessments represent one of the most prominent changes in special education in recent history (Browder, Fallin, et al., 2003). This change creates a continuing need to examine the alternate assessment process and the manner in which it delivers services to students with significant disabilities. Evaluative studies are a useful approach to educational research. Results from these studies have the potential to enhance the “process of reflection and learning in action” for stakeholders involved in the evaluation (Beals, 2003).

Participants

Participants in this study included all (approximately 800) MI-Access District Coordinators in the state of Michigan. According to the *MI-Access Coordinator and Assessment Administrator Manual* (2007/2008), each district must designate one individual as the District MI-Access Coordinator. Districts have the option to utilize their Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) Coordinator as their MI-Access

Coordinator or designate a different individual for the role. The position of MI-Access District Coordinator may include Special Education Directors, School Psychologists, or experienced teachers. However, educational support staff or administration assistants should not be designated as District Coordinators (MDE - Administrator Manual, 2007/2008).

Role of MI-Access District Coordinator

District Coordinators were selected as the focus of this study because they play an essential role in the MI-Access Program. They represent the link between the Michigan Department of Education and Assessment Administrators in the MI-Access Program. Their involvement includes tasks before, during, and after the alternate assessment process (see Table 1). Each of these tasks represents an important step in the successful implementation of the MI-Access assessments.

Table 1

District Coordinators' Major Tasks

Before Assessment	During Assessment	After Assessment
• Inventory materials received • Complete <i>MI-Access Security Compliance Form</i> • Begin filling out <i>District Identification Sheet</i> • Check preprinted student information/ barcode labels against <i>Pre-ID School Rosters</i> • Affix Pre-ID student barcode labels to student answer documents (if applicable) • Prepare materials for distribution to schools • Establish internal district return date • Distribute materials to schools	• Assist school coordinators and assessment administrators as needed • Be available to answer questions • Relay questions to the MI-Access Hotline or OEAA staff as needed • Ensure that ethical assessment administration practices are followed	• Review returned assessment materials for accuracy • Complete <i>District Identification Sheet</i> • Prepare used and unused materials for return shipment (except manuals and rulers) • Ship materials to Questar Assessment, Inc. • Complete online survey

Note: Information represents abbreviated list obtained from the *2007/2008 Coordinator and Assessment Administrator Manual*

Procedure

The number of participants for this study represented the 57 Intermediate School Districts (ISDs) in Michigan, which contain more than 550 public school districts. In addition, there are approximately 190 charter schools in Michigan. These schools are also required to offer MI-Access assessments to eligible students (MDE - Technical Report, 2007). For the purpose of this study, the Michigan Department of Education provided a

list including the names and emails of all acting District Coordinators. With duplicate names and emails removed, the list consisted of 800 MI-Access District Coordinators. Some districts choose to utilize more than one MI-Access District Coordinator making the list larger than the actual number of schools and districts in Michigan. The email addresses of all District Coordinators were uploaded into a secure contact list within SurveyMonkey, an online survey tool.

Survey Development

According to Kuter and Ylimaz (2001), “survey research is one of the most important areas of measurement in applied social research” (p.9). As part of survey development, the researcher communicated with MI-Access Assessment Administrators and District Coordinators to develop a list of common concerns and issues surrounding the MI-Access program. These conversations took place during the Michigan Department of Education – Office of Educational Assessment and Accountability Fall Conferences. The researcher presented at conferences in Battle Creek, Thompsonville, Sterling Heights, Lansing, and Novi, MI. After presentations, the researcher engaged in discussions regarding the MI-Access Program with a variety of stakeholders from around the state. From these informal discussions, the researcher was able to identify five *Essential Alternate Assessment Process Components* including: (1) utilization of program resources, (2) utilization of assessment data and results (3) communication and collaboration in the alternate assessment process, (4) professional development and training for effective implementation, and (5) knowledge of the MI-Access process. These components guided the creation of survey items for this study.

In addition to the Essential Alternate Assessment Process Components, three strands of the Michigan School Improvement Framework that address issues of assessment were utilized in the organization of survey items. These strands included “Teaching for Learning,” “Leadership,” and Personnel and Professional Learning.” By identifying the Framework goals related to alternate assessments, the researcher organized the survey items into one of the three strands.

Survey Instrument

As stated in the Introduction, the research questions guiding this study include:

(1) To what extent are Michigan School Districts utilizing the MI-Access resources (e.g. assessment data and results, released item booklets, and EGLCEs) provided by the Michigan Department of Education to improve instruction for students with cognitive impairments? This question addresses the Teaching for Learning component of the Michigan School Improvement Framework. (2) To what extent are Michigan School Districts communicating and collaborating to successfully implement and coordinate the MI-Access Program for students with cognitive impairments? This question addresses the Leadership and Personnel/Professional Learning components of the Michigan School Improvement Framework. (3) What are District Coordinators’ perceptions regarding the MI-Access program? This question focuses on both the personal role of the District coordinator as well as the training of MI-Access assessment administrators within their districts. In addition, District Coordinators were asked to provide feedback regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the MI-Access process.

The researcher developed an online survey for the specific purpose of evaluating the MI-Access Program through the research questions listed above (see Appendix D).

This survey consists of five sections: (1) demographic information, (2) Teaching for Learning – Strand I from the Michigan School Improvement Framework, (3) Leadership – Strand II from the Michigan School Improvement Framework, (4) Personnel and Professional Learning – Strand II from the Michigan School Improvement Framework, and (5) a set of four open-ended questions.

The first section, *Demographic Information*, included eight questions related to District Coordinator demographics. These questions addressed the amount of time participants have been District Coordinators, their official role within in the district, whether they administered the assessment, if they received any compensation for their involvement in MI-Access, and the amount of time needed for successful implementation. In addition, general demographic questions were included on the survey such as, geographic location, student population, and familiarity with the Extended Grade Level Content Expectations (EGLCEs). The last question in the demographic section addressed District Coordinators' philosophical standpoints regarding alternate assessments. Below is a list of the questions presented to District Coordinators in the Demographic section. Each question has a brief selection of answers and participants were asked to select only one response (see Appendix D for complete survey).

Demographic Questions:

1. How long have you been a MI-Access District Coordinator?
2. What is your official role in the district where you are coordinator?
3. Do you currently administer the MI-Access Assessments?
4. Do you receive any compensation for your role as a MI-Access District Coordinator?

5. If you were to estimate the time you spend on combined tasks (e.g., receiving, delivering, packaging, and returning materials) during one assessment window, how many hours are needed to successfully complete your requirements as a MI-Access District Coordinator?
6. How would you describe the geographic location of your district?
7. What is the approximate student population in your district?
8. How familiar are you with the Michigan School Improvement Framework?
9. Do you agree that all students who have cognitive impairments should be administered alternate state assessments based on Extended Grade Level Content Expectations (EGLCEs)?

The second section, *Teaching for Learning*, consisted of questions aligned to Strand I in the Michigan School Improvement Framework. Strand I requires that “assessments used are aligned to curricular content and are used to guide instructional decisions and monitor student learning” (MDE - School Improvement Framework, 2006). Proper alignment of educational components is an important part of the alternate assessment process. This includes aligning instruction with alternate assessments as well as aligning alternate assessments with state content standards (Courtade-Little & Browder, 2005). This section addressed the process of using assessment resources such as the Extended Grade Level Contents Expectations (EGLCEs) as well as assessment data and results in the MI-Access Program (see Table 2).

Table 2

Teaching for Learning

1	2	3	4	5
As a District Coordinator, I am familiar with the MI-Access data and results provided to my district by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE).	My district adequately disseminates the MI-Access data and results to Assessment Administrators to use for instructional purposes.	My district regularly requests information from Assessment Administrators as to how the MI-Access data and results are being used to improve instruction in the classroom.	My district utilizes the Michigan Extended Grade Level Content Expectations (EGLCEs) to align instruction for students with cognitive impairments with the State Grade Level Content Expectations (GLCEs).	My district utilizes the Item Analysis Reports provided by the MDE to improve instruction for students with cognitive impairments.

The third section, *Leadership*, consisted of questions aligned to Strand II in the Michigan School Improvement Framework. Strand II requires that “school leaders create a school environment where everyone contributes to a cumulative, purposeful and positive effect on student learning” (MDE - School Improvement Framework, 2006). This section addressed knowledge of assessment and data as well as the utilization of time and resources in the alternate assessment process (see Table 3).

Table 3

Leadership

1	2	3	4	5
As a District Coordinator, I consider myself knowledgeable regarding the coordination and successful implementation process of the MI-Access Program in my district.	Assessment Administrators in my district effectively complete their tasks in the MI-Access Program process (e.g., receiving, administering, and returning assessment materials).	My district provides an adequate amount of release time to Assessment Administrators to participate in professional development related to the MI-Access Program.	My district utilizes the Released Item Booklets provided by the MDE to improve instruction for students with cognitive impairments.	My district designates MI-Access Coordinators for each building to organize the dissemination, administration, and collection of the MI-Access Assessments.

The fourth Section, *Personnel and Professional Learning* consisted of questions aligned to Strand III in the Michigan School Improvement Framework. Strand III requires that “the school has highly qualified personnel who continually acquire and use skills, knowledge, attitudes and beliefs necessary to create a culture with high levels of learning for all” (MDE - School Improvement Framework, 2006). This section focused on personal qualifications, communication, and collaboration in the alternate assessment process (see Table 4).

Table 4

Personnel and Professional Learning

1	2	3	4	5
As a District Coordinator, I believe I have the background necessary (e.g., assessment and/or special education training) to successfully coordinate and manage the process of the MI-Access Assessment Program.	My district provides adequate training to Assessment Administrators regarding the administration of MI-Access Assessments.	In my district, Assessment Administrators contact me with questions and/or concerns regarding the MI-Access Program.	As a District Coordinator, I communicate with the MI-Access Program Developers to answer questions and clarify assessment issues (e.g., calling the MI-Access Hotline or the MDE-ASWDP offices).	In my district, Assessment Administrators regularly collaborate with each other to improve the alternate assessment administration process.

Each of these three sections consisted of five Likert scale questions. All questions were presented in a four-point rating scale format including Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. Each choice was assigned a point value from 4 to 1 respectively. In addition, there was an option for “Don’t Know/Not Sure.” This option was given a point value of zero. This type of survey design offers clear choices and is familiar to most participants (Brace, 2004).

Within the survey, items appeared under the three headings from the Michigan School Improvement Framework. However, all survey items were further categorized into the five Essential Alternate Assessment Process Components created by the researcher for future data analysis (see Table 5).

Table 5

Essential Alternate Assessment Process Components

Utilization of Resources	Utilization of Data and Results	Communication and Collaboration	Professional Development and Training	Knowledge of Assessment Process
My district utilizes the Released Item Booklets provided by the MDE to improve instruction for students with cognitive impairments.	As a District Coordinator, I am familiar with the MI-Access data and results provided to my district by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE).	In my district, Assessment Administrators contact me with questions and/or concerns regarding the MI-Access Program.	My district provides adequate training to Assessment Administrators regarding the administration of MI-Access Assessments.	As a District Coordinator, I consider myself knowledgeable regarding the coordination and successful implementation process of the MI-Access Program in my district.
My district utilizes the Michigan Extended Grade Level Content Expectations (EGLCEs) to align instruction for students with cognitive impairments with the State Grade Level Content Expectations (GLCEs).	My district adequately disseminates the MI-Access data and results to Assessment Administrators to use for instructional purposes	As a District Coordinator, I communicate with the MI-Access Program Developers to answer questions and clarify assessment issues (e.g., calling the MI-Access Hotline or the MDE-ASWDP offices).	My district provides an adequate amount of release time to Assessment Administrators to participate in professional development related to the MI-Access Program.	As a District Coordinator, I believe I have the background necessary (e.g., assessment and/or special education training) to successfully coordinate and manage the process of the MI-Access Assessment Program.
My district utilizes the Item Analysis Reports provided by the MDE to improve instruction for students with cognitive impairments.	My district regularly requests information from Assessment Administrators as to how the MI-Access data and results are being used to improve instruction in the classroom.	In my district, Assessment Administrators regularly collaborate improve the alternate assessment administration process	Assessment Administrators in my district effectively complete their tasks in the MI-Access Program process (e.g., receiving, administering, and returning assessment materials).	My district designates MI-Access Coordinators for each building to organize the dissemination, administration, and collection of the MI-Access Assessments

The final section of the survey consisted of four open-ended questions. These questions addressed the MI-Access assessment process in relation to improvement, implementation, strengths, and weaknesses. The open-ended questions included:

1. Are there changes that could help improve the implementation process of the MIAccess Program (e.g., before, during, and after the assessment)?
2. Considering your response to the previous question, what is the most effective way for your recommendations to be implemented?
3. What do you consider the most significant strengths of the MI-Access Assessment Program?
4. What do you consider the most significant weaknesses of the MI-Access Assessment Program?

Pilot Survey

It is crucial in survey development that a pilot survey be conducted to ensure there are no errors in the instrument that could reduce the return rate (Spaulding, 2008). For this study, 20 MDE employees and MSU colleagues were asked to pilot the online survey and offer feedback regarding format, structure, clarity of questions, and amount of time for completion. The pilot participants received the survey through the online survey tool, SurveyMonkey. This ensured that the pilot participants would view the survey in the same format as the MI-Access District Coordinators.

Feedback from the pilot survey revealed that participants were able to complete the survey in less than twenty minutes. This included brief responses to the four open-ended questions. Several of the pilot participants indicated a desire to know their progress as they completed the survey. Using a design tool in SurveyMonkey, a “progress bar”

was added to accommodate this request. This tool allowed participants to view the “percent completed” and the “percent remaining” on the survey as they addressed each item.

Overall, feedback from the pilot survey was positive and participants agreed that the online format was simple to navigate. There were no comments regarding the clarity of the survey questions.

Data Collection

This evaluative study collected data using SurveyMonkey, an online survey tool. The email addresses of 800 MI-Access District Coordinators were uploaded into a secure contact list. After the Spring MI-Access assessment window closed on March 28, 2008, an email with a link to the survey was sent to all District Coordinators on March 31. Due to this study’s focus on the *process* of the MI-Access Program, the researcher purposefully selected this date for survey distribution. By sending the survey immediately following the assessment window, the researcher hoped to collect more specific and relevant feedback regarding the alternate assessment process.

The survey window remained open for three weeks. During that time, responses were monitored and follow-up email requests were sent weekly to District Coordinators who had not responded. This is considered a beneficial aspect of online surveys and can potentially increase response rates up to 25% (Sheehan, 2001).

Data Analysis

In evaluative research, the major goal should be to “influence decision-making or policy formulation through the provision of empirically-driven feedback” (Trochim, 2006). Data analysis in this study focused on finding the strengths and weaknesses

surrounding the process of Michigan's alternate assessment program as expressed by MI-Access District Coordinators. Descriptive statistics from both Likert scale questions and open-ended questions were compiled and analyzed to evaluate this specific alternate assessment system.

All data from selected response survey items were reported as an overall score and as disaggregated scores for two groups of District Coordinators. The first group consisted of participants who function in an Administration position within the education system while the second group consisted of participants working as Practitioners. For the purposes of this study, Administration refers to participants who identified themselves as either Special Education Directors or Principals and Practitioners are those participants who identified themselves as Teachers, Guidance Counselors, School Psychologists, or Other. The purpose behind creating these subgroups was to identify potential variations in District Coordinators' responses based on their primary role within the district. During data analysis, significant differences were observed between the groups in the area of assessment administration. Therefore, all analyses were conducted with an overall mean score for total participants as well as the subgroups of Administration and Practitioner. In addition, a t-test for significance between means was conducted for the two groups. This created the opportunity to identify and address potential response differences based on the role of the District Coordinator.

Analysis of quantitative data (Likert scale items) was conducted within each of the research questions to address the specific area of inquiry. In addition, demographic data was analyzed and presented by both frequency (responses) and percent

(respondents). This data provided background information that was used throughout the results section to better understand District Coordinators' responses to survey items.

All survey items were also analyzed within the Strands of the Michigan School Improvement Framework including "Teaching for Learning," "Leadership," and "Personnel and Professional Learning." Similar quantitative analysis focused on responses within each of the Essential Alternate Assessment Process Components developed by the researcher. These included: (1) utilization of program resources, (2) utilization of assessment data and results (3) communication and collaboration in the alternate assessment process, (4) professional development and training for effective implementation, and (5) knowledge of the MI-Access process.

For each of the three research questions, School Improvement Framework Strands, and Essential Alternate Assessment Components, descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated (based on the assigned point values of 1-4). Mean scores were rank ordered and comparisons were made within Strands and Components to identify areas of strengths and weakness in the MI-Access alternate assessment process. Samples of participant responses from the comment section following each question will be presented in support of quantitative responses.

Finally, content analysis was conducted on the open-ended questions addressing the strengths and weakness of the MI-Access program as perceived by District Coordinators. After analysis of the open-ended questions began, it became apparent that most respondents approached the first question (*Are there changes that could help improve the implementation process of the MI-Access Program (e.g., before, during, and after the assessment)?*) as a question regarding weaknesses. In addition, the second

question (*Considering your response to the previous question, what is the most effective way for your recommendations to be implemented?*) provided responses that were either unclear, or were simply reiterating the weakness. Therefore, only the questions specifically regarding MI-Access strengths and weaknesses (*What do you consider the most significant strengths of the MI-Access Assessment Program?* and *What do you consider the most significant weaknesses of the MI-Access Assessment Program?*) were analyzed. Data from these two questions was coded and categorized based on participant responses and presented according to frequency of responses and percentage of respondents. Six categories were identified for the question focusing on the strengths of MI-Access and four categories were identified in relation the perceived weaknesses of the alternate assessment program.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This chapter presents the demographic data of participating MI-Access District Coordinators including pertinent participant comments that support survey responses. In addition, each research question is presented with data from corresponding survey items. The significance of the first research question was to examine the extent to which Michigan School Districts utilize the MI-Access data and results as well as additional alternate assessment resources provided by the Michigan Department of Education to improve instruction for students with significant disabilities. The second research question addressed the collaboration and communication that takes place during the MI-Access alternate assessment process. The third and final research question focused on District Coordinators' perceptions of the MI-Access program including their personal role and the training of Assessment Administrators. This research question also included survey items that were optional and open-ended. These items allowed District Coordinators an opportunity to express their opinions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the MI-Access process. Lastly, summary data is presented to show responses within the strands of the Michigan School Improvement Framework (see Tables 2-4) as well as the Essential Alternate Assessment Process Components (see Table 5).

Demographic Data

Response Rate. Three email requests were sent to MI-Access District Coordinators asking them to complete an online survey through SurveyMonkey, a web based survey tool. The first email was sent on March 31, 2008. A follow up email was

sent to District Coordinators who had not responded after one week (April 7) and again after two weeks (April 14).

During week one, 268 District Coordinators completed the survey. There were 47 surveys that were returned due to “Undeliverable Message” or “Delivery Status Failure” and eight messages were not delivered because of “Spam Blocking” software. During week one, 33 of the 47 “Undeliverable Messages” were reconciled and resent on April 7. The eight “Spam Blocked” messages were resent directly from the researcher’s email account without further problem. In addition, nine emails were received during week one from District Coordinators who wanted to participate in the survey, but were unable to open the document through the link provided. Emails were sent to these participants with a copy of the survey attached in a word document. All nine surveys were returned during week two and added to the survey completion totals.

During week two, 523 emails were sent to District Coordinators with 106 completed surveys returned. The same 14 “Undeliverable Messages” that were identified in week one appeared again. Attempts to reconcile these addresses were unsuccessful. The final email was sent during week three to 417 District Coordinators. Again, the same 14 “Undeliverable Messages” along with 132 completed surveys were returned to the researcher. In sum, 506 of the 786 MI-Access District Coordinators who received the email request completed the online survey for an overall return rate of 64.4% (see Table 6).

Table 6

Weekly Response Rate

	Sent	Completed	Undeliverable
Week 1	800	268	47
Week 2	532	106	14
Week 3	426	132	14
Total	---	506	14

Participants' Roles. The majority of District Coordinators who responded to this survey (76%) had been in the role of Coordinator for more than two years. Twenty-seven percent identified themselves as Special Education Directors, 18% as Teachers, 14% as Principals, 4% as Guidance Counselors, and 2% as School Psychologists. In addition, 35% selected “other” to identify their role within the school district. Other roles identified by District Coordinators included Curriculum Directors, Transition Coordinators, Teacher Consultants, Inclusion Specialists, and District Testing Coordinators.

Interestingly, 71 of the 178 District Coordinators who listed their role as “other” identified themselves as some type of Teacher, Principal, or Special Education Director. It is not clear if this question was misinterpreted or if these participants did not identify with the choices provided in the survey item. In reevaluating the data with this additional information, the results indicate that the participants consisted of 29.6% Special Education Directors, 24.7% Teachers, 19% as Principals, 4% as Guidance Counselors, and 1.6% as School Psychologists with the category of “other” containing 21.1% of responses (see Table 7). In addition, twelve survey respondents identified themselves as

Administrative Assistants, Secretaries, or Paraprofessionals. However, the Michigan Department of Education – Office of Educational Assessment and Accountability explicitly states that support staff or administrative assistants are not to act as MI-Access District Coordinators (MDE – Administrator Manual, 2007/2008).

For the purpose of data reporting and analysis, participants in this study were separated into two groups. District Coordinators in the role of either Special Education Directors or Principals were identified as “Administration” and represent 48.6% of overall participants. The remainder of District Coordinators were identified as “Practitioners” and consist of 51.4% of participants.

Table 7

Participant's role

	Frequency	Percent of Respondents
Special Education Directors	150	29.6
Teachers	125	24.7
Principals	96	19.0
Guidance Counselors	20	4.0
School Psychologists	8	1.6
Other	107	21.1
Total	506	100

Frequency and percents represent recalculation including “other” roles that matched survey choices.

The majority of District Coordinators (60%) indicated that they had never administered the MI-Access assessment while 40% were either currently administering or

had administered the assessment it in the past. However, the percentage of participants who had administered the assessment varied between groups. Of participating District Coordinators, 50% of the Practitioner group had administered the assessments while only 15% of the Administration group reported that they had participated in assessment administration.

For those who had administered the assessment, 49% indicated that they spent ten hours or less on the assessment process and an additional 32% stated that the process required between 11 and 20 hours to successfully complete the MI-Access requirements. Considerably less District Coordinators (15%) reported spending between 20 and 40 hours per assessment window and only 4% reported the process taking more than 40 hours. Overall, only 11% of respondents reported that receive any compensation for their role as District Coordinators.

Geographically, 36% of participants described their location as “small town/rural” and 28.5% were “suburban.” The least amount of participants were from mid-size cities and urban areas with 7.1% and 3.2% of participants respectively (see Table 8).

Table 8

Geographic Locations

	Frequency	Percent of Respondents
Urban	16	3.2
Mid-size City	36	7.1
Suburban	144	28.4
Small Town/Rural	182	36.0
I provide services in a charter school.	78	15.4
I provide services at the ISD level.	50	9.9
Total	506	100

One of the last questions in the demographic section of the survey focused on District Coordinators' familiarity with the Michigan School Improvement Framework. Of the 506 respondents, 45.1% considered themselves very familiar and 49% felt that they were somewhat familiar with this document. Only 5.9% indicated that they were not familiar with the Michigan School Improvement Framework.

Participants' Beliefs Regarding Assessment. The final question in the demographic section asked District Coordinators if they agreed that all students who have cognitive impairments should be administered alternate state assessments based on Extended Grade Level Content Expectations (EGLCEs). Sixty-nine percent of participants either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement while 27% disagreed or

strongly disagreed. Out of the 506 respondents, 5% did not know or were not sure about this survey item. District Coordinators who disagreed with this statement were asked, “If you disagree, what do you believe are the exceptions?” There were 138 participants who disagreed with this statement with 122 (of the 138) providing comments to support their response. The Administration and Practitioner groups reported similar opinions regarding this statement. Sixty-nine percent of the Administration group and 68% of the Practitioner group either agreed or strongly agreed. Similarly, 30% of the Administration group and 26% of the Practitioner group disagreed/strongly disagreed. More Practitioners (6%) than Administration (1%) were unsure how to respond to this statement.

All 122 responses to this question were coded into six categories (see Table 9). These categories reflect both student-centered explanations for exclusion from state assessments (e.g. medical fragility) as well as instructional or academic rationale (e.g. not useful in IEP development and negative affects on Adequate Yearly Progress).

Table 9

Exceptions to Assessing all Students with CI

	Frequency	Percent of Respondents
Students are too medically fragile	12	9.8
Should be tested on functional skills, not academics	36	29.5
Alternate assessment have negative affect on AYP	15	12.3
Too much variation in student ability	29	23.8
Results are not useful for IEP or instruction	20	16.4
Response unclear/off topic	10	8.2
Total	122	100

Research Question One: Utilization of Resources

Research question one stated, “To what extent are Michigan School Districts utilizing the MI-Access resources (e.g. assessment data and results, released item booklets, and EGLCEs) provided by the Michigan Department of Education to improve instruction for students with cognitive impairments?” This research question was divided into two parts. Part one focused on the use of assessment data and results for improved

educational outcomes. Part two of this question focused specifically on the resources provided by the Michigan Department of Education and the extent to which they are utilized by school districts. Within the survey, the following six items addressed this research question:

Assessment Data and Results:

1. As a District Coordinator, I am familiar with the MI-Access data and results provided to my district by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE).
2. My district adequately disseminates the MI-Access data and results to Assessment Administrators to use for instructional purposes.
3. My district regularly requests information from Assessment Administrators as to how the MI-Access data and results are being used to improve instruction in the classroom.

Utilization of Resources:

4. My district utilizes the Michigan Extended Grade Level Content Expectations (EGLCEs) to align instruction for students with cognitive impairments with the State Grade Level Content Expectations (GLCEs).
5. My district utilizes the Item Analysis Reports provided by the MDE to improve instruction for students with cognitive impairments.
6. My district utilizes the Released Item Booklets provided by the MDE to improve instruction for students with cognitive impairments.

Assessment Data and Results. The vast majority of MI-Access District Coordinators (94%, $M = 3.39$) either agreed or strongly agreed that they were familiar with the data and results provided by the MDE. In addition, the majority of Coordinators

(80%, $M = 3.00$) also agreed or strongly agreed that their district adequately disseminated the data and results to assessment administrators. There was less agreement (39%) when asked if the Coordinators' districts regularly requested information from assessment administrators regarding their use of the MI-Access data and results in the classroom. Fifty-four percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that this practice was utilized within their districts to improve instruction for students with cognitive impairments. The mean score for this item was much lower (2.17) than the other two items in this section of research question one (see Table 10).

In the area of MI-Access data and results, Practitioners reported similar responses to Administration ($M = 3.42$ and 3.34 respectively) regarding familiarity with this information. However, Practitioners showed less agreement ($M = 2.95$) when asked if the data and results were adequately disseminated in their districts. The Administration group was more likely to agree with this same statement with a mean score of 3.06. In addition, Practitioners and Administration had similar agreement ($M = 2.18$ and 2.20 respectively) that their districts requested information from MI-Access Assessment Administrators regarding how the data and results were used to improve instruction (see Table 10).

As with all questions on the survey, District Coordinators had the opportunity to provide additional information in comment boxes following each survey item. There were 94 comments from the three items pertaining to MI-Access data and results. These comments represented a variety of explanations as to how (or if) districts utilized this information. Examples of comments explaining why District Coordinators were not using this information included, "There is not much of the data that is actually useful for

instructional purposes,” “The results come so late they are not relevant,” “Hard to find time to meet and explain it all,” and “The data is not very informative.”

Other comments in this section expressed an indifference to the data and results including, “I disseminate the data but don’t follow up with the staff,” “It is still left up to individual building administrators and teachers,” and “The information is distributed when received. It is not looked at again.” There were also several comments reflecting upon the need to incorporate and utilize the MI-Access data and results such as, “It is discussed at curriculum meetings but we need to work at it more,” “We are working at this in our district,” and “I need to get better at this.” Most of the comments shared information as to why District Coordinators were not utilizing the data and results or expressed their desire to change this practice. However, the following comment represents a detailed description of how one District Coordinator was using this information to improve instruction for students with cognitive impairments:

I meet individually with each assessment administrator to go over results. I meet with the school administrators as a whole group. I also meet with just the CI teachers from the district in a small group to help them with interpreting (sic) the data and determining how we can provide adequate instruction across grades/levels. A third meeting is held with ALL of the spec ed teachers at the secondary level (both Middle School and HS) and the Elementary CI teachers are included in that as well (again this is to help us provide the best instruction across the board for these students in grades K through 12).

Table 10

Assessment Data and Results

	Overall Mean	Practitioner Mean	SD	Administration Mean	SD
DC Familiarity	3.39	3.42	0.568	3.34	0.714
Adequate Dissemination	3.00	2.95	0.753	3.06	0.743
Requests for Utilization	2.17	2.18	0.981	2.20	0.833

Note. Mean was calculated on a four-point scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree. Responses of “don’t know/not sure” = 0

Note. * $p < .01$

Utilization of Resources. The mean scores for each item in this section were less than 3.0 (see Table 11). More than half (66%) of District Coordinators reported that their districts utilized the Extended Grade Level Content Expectations (EGLCEs) to align instruction to the state Grade Level Content Expectations (GLCEs) for students with cognitive impairments. Twenty-two percent disagreed with this statement and another 12% were not sure if their district was aligning instruction between the EGLCEs and the GLCEs.

An additional resource provided to Michigan School Districts by the MDE is referred to as an Item Analysis Report. This report provides information regarding student performance at the classroom, school, district, and state level for each released item from the assessment. Fifty-two percent of MI-Access District Coordinators reported utilizing this resource to incorporate the data from alternate assessments. The remaining half of survey participants either disagreed (35%) or were not sure (13%) if their districts

were utilizing the Item Analysis Reports to improve instruction for students with cognitive impairments.

In the area of resource utilization, Practitioners reported less agreement on all three questions than the Administration group. There was a significant difference between the groups regarding the use of EGLCEs to improve instruction ($t(504) = 2.77$, $p < 0.1$) with the Administration group more likely to report that they were be utilized. Similarly, Practitioners reported lower levels of agreement than the Administration group regarding the use of Released Item Booklets ($M = 2.00$ vs. 2.14) as well as the utilization of Item Analysis Reports ($M = 2.23$ vs. 2.31) (see Table 11).

District Coordinators had the opportunity to provide comments to each survey item in the Utilization of Resources section. There were 144 total responses in reference to the three items presented in this portion of the survey. Comments provided by District Coordinators represented a variety of familiarity with the MI-Access resources. For example, there were negative comments such as, “Not at all appropriate for CI” (referring to EGLCEs), “Information is not very helpful,” “Almost worthless for the MI-Access” (referring to Item Analysis Reports), and “Most teachers do not find them relevant” (referring to Released Item Booklets).

As with comments presented in the previous section, there was a variety of participant responses that reflected an indifference to the MI-Access resources including, “Some people do it. Some do not. It is not pushed in the district” (referring to the EGLCEs) and “I let it slip when I get busy” (referring to the Item Analysis Reports). In addition, there were many comments regarding the Released Item Booklets that reflected the District Coordinator’s lack of awareness regarding this resource. Some of these

comments included, “I have not seen these booklets,” “Did not know they existed,” “Were these available for last year? I am not sure about the dessimation (sic) of this information” and “As far as I know, teachers do not even get a copy of the released item booklets.” It is important to note that this resource was available during the 2006-2007 school year and that teachers, administrators and/or parents have free access to all grade and content level Released Item Booklets through the MI-Access website.

While many comments reflected negative opinions or indifference regarding the MI-Access resources, there were also a variety of comments that shared how Districts Coordinators utilized (or plan to utilize) these documents to improve instruction for students with cognitive impairments. For example, “I recently received training on this through the MEAP/MI-Access OEAA conference and we will be using this information to align instruction with EGLCEs,” “Individual teachers use this information to guide instruction for students” (referring to Item Analysis Reports), and “We are working on getting info ready for our teachers this coming school year” (referring to the Released Item Booklets).

Table 11

Utilization of Resources

	Overall Mean	Practitioner Mean	SD	Administration Mean	SD
Use of EGLCEs	2.55	2.44*	1.224	2.72*	1.033
Use of Item Analysis	2.27	2.23	1.224	2.31	1.033
Use of Released Items	2.04	2.00	1.278	2.14	1.118

Note. Mean was calculated on a four-point scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree. Responses of “don’t know/not sure” = 0

Note. * $p < .01$

Research Question Two: Communication and Collaboration

Research question two focused on the communication and collaboration surrounding the MI-Access process. Specifically, this question asked, “To what extent are Michigan School Districts communicating and collaborating to successfully implement and coordinate the MI-Access Program for students with cognitive impairments?” Within the survey, the following three items addressed this research question:

1. In my district, Assessment Administrators contact me with questions and/or concerns regarding the MI-Access Program.
2. As a District Coordinator, I communicate with the MI-Access Program Developers to answer questions and clarify assessment issues (e.g., calling the MI-Access Hotline or the MDE-ASWDP offices).

3. In my district, Assessment Administrators regularly collaborate with each other to improve the alternate assessment administration process.

Overwhelmingly, District Coordinators agreed or strongly agreed (91%) that Assessment Administrators in their districts contacted them with question or concerns regarding the MI-Access program with a mean item score of 3.25. In addition, 88% ($M = 3.09$) of participants reported that they communicate with the MI-Access Program Developers/MDE to answer questions regarding the alternate assessment process (see Table 12).

There was less agreement by District Coordinators regarding the collaboration between Assessment Administrators in their districts ($M = 2.28$). Forty-eight percent agreed or strongly agreed with this statement while 40% either disagreed or strongly disagreed that collaboration between Assessment Administrators was taking place in their districts. There were also 12% of District Coordinators who reported that they did not know or were not sure if Assessment Administrators were collaborating regarding the alternate assessment process (see Table 12).

The Administration and Practitioner groups reported similar levels of agreement regarding whether Assessment Administrators contacted them with questions concerning the MI-Access Program. In addition, these groups reported similar agreement that, as District Coordinators, they contact the MI-Access Program Developers to answer questions and clarify issues related to the alternate assessment program. While responses were similar in the area of communication, there was less agreement regarding collaboration. District Coordinators from the Administration group were more likely to identify that Assessment Administrators in their districts collaborated with each other to

improve the implementation of MI-Access ($M = 2.38$). Participating District Coordinators from the Practitioner group reported less collaboration between Assessment Administrators within their districts ($M = 2.22$) (see Table 12).

There were limited comments provided by District Coordinators regarding the survey items focusing on communication with 76 comments between the two questions. Most of these comments simply pointed out that the participant was the only one administering the assessment so communication was limited. However, there were more comments regarding the communication process with the MI-Access Program Developers and/or the MDE. The vast majority of these comments were positive. Some examples include, “They have been very helpful and timely in responses,” “They’re always very helpful and can answer my questions,” and “MI-Access personnel have been extremely helpful and supportive in all areas when I have questions or problems.” Less than 10% of the comments reflected negative experiences. For example, “They never responded to an email I sent and it is hard to contact by phone.” The other negative comments reflected the same issues regarding lack of response and difficulty contacting MI-Access personnel by phone.

Optional comments provided by District Coordinators regarding collaboration totaled 50, but there were very few different topics. Many participants noted that they were the only one administering the MI-Access assessments in their district so collaboration within the district was not possible. Other comments in this area identified the lack of time provided by the district to Assessment Administrators (often referred to as being teachers) for collaboration on the alternate assessment process.

Table 12

Communication and Collaboration

	Overall Mean	Practitioner Mean	SD	Administration Mean	SD
AA Contact with Questions	3.25	3.21	0.864	3.31	0.799
Communicate with MDE	3.09	3.14	0.872	3.03	0.868
District Collaboration	2.28	2.22	1.190	2.38	0.908

Note. Mean was calculated on a four-point scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree. Responses of “don’t know/not sure” = 0

Note. * $p < .01$

Research Question Three: District Coordinators’ Perceptions

Research question three consisted of two sub-inquires that addressed the general question “What are District Coordinators’ Perceptions of the MI-Access Program?” This question focused on the District Coordinator’s personal role in the process as well as the training of the Assessment Administrators within their districts. Within the survey, the following three items addressed District Coordinators’ perceptions of their personal role in the MI-Access program.

1. As a District Coordinator, I consider myself knowledgeable regarding the coordination and successful implementation process of the MI-Access Program in my district.

2. As a District Coordinator, I believe I have the background necessary (e.g., assessment and/or special education training) to successfully coordinate and manage the process of the MI-Access Assessment Program.
3. My district designates MI-Access Coordinators for each building to organize the dissemination, administration, and collection of the MI-Access Assessments.

The second section of research question three addressed the perceptions of District Coordinators regarding the training and ability of Assessment Administrators in their districts. The following three items were included in the survey to collect data for this question:

1. Assessment Administrators in my district effectively complete their tasks in the MI-Access Program process (e.g., receiving, administering, and returning assessment materials).
2. My district provides an adequate amount of release time to Assessment Administrators to participate in professional development related to the MI-Access Program.
3. My district provides adequate training to Assessment Administrators regarding the administration of MI-Access Assessments.

District Coordinators' Perceptions of Personal Role. The majority (93%) of District Coordinators reported that they considered themselves knowledgeable in the MI-Access process with a mean score of 3.26. Similarly, 90% of participants reported that they also had the background necessary to perform the tasks of MI-Access District Coordinator ($M = 3.28$). The final question regarding the role of District Coordinators focused on the opportunity to delegate tasks through the designation of building

coordinators. There was less agreement to this statement with 63% of survey participants agreeing or strongly agreeing that this is something they practice in their role as MI-Access District Coordinator ($M = 2.68$) (see Table 13).

Regarding their personal role in the MI-Access Process, the Practitioner group reported similar agreement as the Administration group when asked whether they considered themselves knowledgeable in the coordination and implementation of MI-Access ($M = 3.28$ and 3.22 respectively). There was also similar agreement regarding whether District Coordinators believed they had the necessary background to successfully coordinate the MI-Access program with a mean score of 3.00 for Practitioners and 3.26 for the Administration group. There was a significant difference between the groups regarding the designation of MI-Access Building Coordinators within their districts ($t(504) = 4.69, p < 0.1$) with the Practitioner group being more likely to agree (see Table 13).

Again, District Coordinators provided optional comments to the survey items in this section. There were 24 comments regarding individual knowledge and 26 comments pertaining to necessary background. The majority of these comments expressed Coordinators' desire to have more training and support in the area of MI-Access in order to "streamline" the process.

There were 80 comments related to the survey item on designating MI-Access building coordinators. Most District Coordinators reported that they were the only personnel involved in the MI-Access process. Due to this staffing arrangement, it was not necessary to designate MI-Access coordinators or other assistance at the building level. However, there were also comments that expressed frustration with the process of

designating building coordinators due to time and training constraints. Comments in this area included, “I do everything in my district because it is easier than training others and listening to them complain about it,” “I would rather take my time and provide Assessment Administrators directly with the materials than train someone else to complete this time consuming process,” and “I do EVERYTHING, including disseminating materials, tracking down/collecting materials to be returned, double checking counts/materials, etc.”

Table 13

DC Perceptions of Personal Role

	Overall Mean	Practitioner Mean	SD	Administration Mean	SD
Knowledge	3.26	3.28	0.698	3.22	0.736
Background	3.28	3.30	0.762	3.26	0.761
Assigned Coordinators	2.68	2.92*	1.051	2.48*	1.060

Note. Mean was calculated on a four-point scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree. Responses of “don’t know/not sure” = 0

Note. * $p < .01$

District Coordinators’ Perceptions of Assessment Administrators Training and Ability. In this section of research question three, almost all District Coordinators (95%) reported that Assessment Administrators in their districts effectively complete their MI-Access related tasks ($M = 3.38$). Only 3% disagreed and no participants strongly disagreed to this statement. While most District Coordinators reported that the MI-Access assessments were being implemented effectively, fewer believed that Assessment

Administrators were allowed an adequate amount of release time for professional development in the area of MI-Access. Sixty-one percent agreed that the amount of release time was adequate while 35% either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement ($M = 2.56$). Similarly, 70% of District Coordinators believed that their districts provided adequate training to Assessment Administrators while 26% of participants disagreed and 4% were not sure if the training was adequate ($M = 2.74$) (see Table 14).

There was a significant difference between the groups regarding whether Assessment Administrators were effectively completing their tasks in the MI-Access process ($t(504) = 2.77, p < 0.1$) with the Administration group more likely to agree. The Administration group was also more likely to report that their districts provided adequate release time for the alternate assessment process. Both groups reported similar agreement ($M = 2.76$ and 2.73) regarding the opportunities for MI-Access training within their districts (see Table 14).

There were only 22 comments provided by District Coordinators related to the effectiveness of Assessment Administrators in their districts. Most comments simply reiterated that there was only one or two Assessment Administrators in the district and problems in this area were not an issue. However, there were several comments that addressed the process of returning materials and deadlines. Examples of these comments included, “Most do...some do not read the material and return incorrectly. This requires additional time on my part for corrections” and “I often have to remind administrators of deadlines, collect materials, and sometimes administer assessments myself in order to complete during the assessment window.”

There were 36 comments provided on the topic of Assessment Administrator release time for professional development. Every comment expressed either the lack of time, money, or interest in the process. For example, “The assessment administrators get no release time. The teachers have to do this on top of everything they do,” “Release time is not an option as it would take away too much time from (sic) instruction,” and “There is no release time for training...it is considered an added duty.” There were 32 comments related to adequate training for Assessment Administrators. These comments continued with the same theme surrounding a lack of time, money, and interest. In addition, there were six comments related to the need for appropriate training in order to improve ethics in the area of alternate assessments for students with cognitive impairments.

Table 14

DC Perceptions of AA Training and Ability

	Overall Mean	Practitioner Mean	SD	Administration Mean	SD
Task	3.38	3.30*	0.717	3.47*	0.662
Completion					
Release Time	2.56	2.51	1.015	2.63	0.856
Adequate					
Training	2.74	2.76	0.928	2.73	0.849

Note. Mean was calculated on a four-point scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree. Responses of “don’t know/not sure” = 0

Note. * $p < .01$

Data by Strands from Michigan School Improvement Framework

Survey items for this study were guided by the research questions as well as the Michigan School Improvement Framework. The Framework consists of five strands, three of which address assessment and are relevant to the questions presented in this research. As presented in Tables 2-4, survey items were divided into the Framework Strands of “Teaching for Learning,” “Leadership,” and “Personnel & Professional Learning.” Table 15 presents the means and standard deviations from the District Coordinators responses within each of the Strands. The survey items from the Personnel & Professional Learning Strand consisted of the highest level of agreement with a mean of 2.93. District Coordinators’ responses to the Teaching for Learning Strand represent the lowest level of agreement with a mean of 2.68 while the Leadership Strand had a mean of 2.78. Overall, there was a difference of .25 in the means of the three School Improvement Strands with no differences being significant. District Coordinators from the Administration group were more likely than Practitioners to agree with the statements from each of the Michigan School Improvement Framework Strands.

Table 15

Michigan School Improvement Framework Strand Scores

	Overall Mean	Practitioner Mean	SD	Administration Mean	SD
Teaching for Learning	2.68	2.64	1.125	2.72	0.971
Leadership	2.78	2.78	1.088	2.79	1.026
Personnel & Professional Learning	2.93	2.92	1.014	2.94	0.907

Note. Mean was calculated on a four-point scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree. Responses of “don’t know/not sure” = 0

Note. * $p < .01$

Data by Essential Alternate Assessment Process Components

Survey items for this study were also categorized into a set of five Essential Alternate Assessment Process Components developed by the researcher (see Table 5). These components were addressed through the research questions discussed above and each research question subset aligns to an Alternate Assessment Process Component. As shown in Table 16, District Coordinators had the highest level of agreement on survey questions from the Professional Development and Training component with a mean score of 3.08. The lowest level of agreement to the Process Components can be seen in the Utilization of Data and Resources with a mean score of 2.29. District Coordinators in the Administration group reported higher levels of agreement than Practitioners in all but one (Professional Development and Training) of the Essential Alternate Assessment Process

Table 16

Essential Alternate Assessment Process Components Scores

	Mean	Practitioner Mean	Administration Mean
Utilization of Resources	2.29	2.22	2.39
Utilization of Data and Results	2.85	2.85	2.86
Communication and Collaboration	2.87	2.87	2.91
Professional Development and Training	3.08	3.16	3.00
Knowledge of Assessment Process	2.89	2.87	2.94

Note. Mean was calculated on a four-point scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree. Responses of “don’t know/not sure” = 0

Note. * $p < .01$

Open Ended Questions – MI-Access Strengths and Weaknesses

For the purposes of this study, two of the four open-ended questions were analyzed. The research made this decision after the initial analysis of all open-ended questions began. After closer review, it became apparent that most respondents approached the first question (*Are there changes that could help improve the implementation process of the MI-Access Program (e.g., before, during, and after the assessment)?*) as a question regarding weaknesses. In addition, the second question (*Considering your response to the previous question, what is the most effective way for*

your recommendations to be implemented?) provided responses that were either unclear, or were simply reiterating the weakness. Therefore, only the questions specifically regarding MI-Access strengths and weaknesses (*What do you consider the most significant strengths of the MI-Access Assessment Program?* and *What do you consider the most significant weaknesses of the MI-Access Assessment Program?*) were analyzed.

These questions were optional and District Coordinators did not have to respond in order to submit a completed survey. There were 332 responses (65.6% of total participants) related to the question regarding the strengths of MI-Access and 304 responses (60.1 % of total participants) who addressed the most significant weaknesses of the program. All responses were coded and categorized according to observable themes (see Appendix E for coding samples).

There were six categories identified in the area of MI-Access Strengths including categories of “Off topic” and “Other” (see Table 17). Many District Coordinators used this question as a forum to voice their frustration or personal experiences with the MI-Access program which increased the number of “off topic” responses. Open-ended responses for the second question regarding MI-Access Weakness required fewer categories for a total of five including a category of “Off topic” and “Other” (see Table 18).

Table 17

Responses to Open-Ended Question: MI-Access Strengths

Category	Frequency	Percent
Includes all students in accountability systems	133	40.0
Allows consistent progress monitoring	58	17.5
MI-Access is well organized and easily administered	39	11.8
Makes teachers accountable for learning	25	7.5
Off topic	54	16.3
Other	23	6.9
Total	332	100

Table 18

Responses to Open-Ended Question: MI-Access Weaknesses

	Frequency	Percent
Not relevant/appropriate to students needs	155	51.0
Too time consuming/Too much paperwork	98	32.2
Does not appropriately assess Mild CI	21	6.9
Off topic	6	2.0
Other	24	7.9
Total	304	100

Table 19

Summary of Data by Survey Questions from Essential AA Components

Assessment Data and Results					
	Overall Mean	Pract. Mean	SD	Admin. Mean	SD
DC Familiarity	3.39	3.42	0.568	3.34	0.714
Adequate Dissemination	3.00	2.95	0.753	3.06	0.743
Requests for Utilization	2.17	2.18	0.981	2.20	0.833
Utilization of Resources					
	Overall Mean	Pract. Mean	SD	Admin. Mean	SD
Use of EGLCEs	2.55	2.44*	1.224	2.72*	1.033
Use of Item Analysis	2.27	2.23	1.224	2.31	1.033
Use of Released Items	2.04	2.00	1.278	2.14	1.118
Communication and Collaboration					
	Overall Mean	Pract. Mean	SD	Admin. Mean	SD
AA Contact with Questions	3.25	3.21	0.864	3.31	0.799
Communicate with MDE	3.09	3.14	0.872	3.03	0.868
District Collaboration	2.28	2.22	1.190	2.38	0.908
DC Perceptions of Personal Role					
	Overall Mean	Pract. Mean	SD	Admin. Mean	SD
Knowledge	3.26	3.28	0.698	3.22	0.736
Background	3.28	3.30	0.762	3.26	0.761
Assigned Coordinators	2.68	2.92*	1.051	2.48*	1.060
DC Perceptions of AA Training and Ability					
	Overall Mean	Pract. Mean	SD	Admin. Mean	SD
Task Completion	3.38	3.30*	0.717	3.47*	0.662
Release Time	2.56	2.51	1.015	2.63	0.856
Adequate Training	2.74	2.76	0.928	2.73	0.849

Note. * $p < .01$

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the MI-Access alternate assessment program used in Michigan. Survey data from approximately 64% of District Coordinators provided important information regarding the implementation of the State's alternate assessment system for students who have, or function as if they have, cognitive impairments. Evaluation of this data focused on demographic information, utilization of alternate assessment data and resources, communication and collaboration during the assessment process, and District Coordinators' perceptions regarding the MI-Access program. The results of this evaluative study were presented in Chapter 4. Through analysis of survey data, several issues and trends in Michigan's alternate assessment system were identified. This chapter presents a discussion of the data with a focus on the demographic information provided by MI-Access District Coordinators as well as each of the three research questions guiding this study. Key findings, interpretations, and recommendations are presented in table format at the conclusion of each of these sections. In addition, this chapter will present the limitations, suggested future research in the area of alternate assessments, and a conclusion of this evaluation.

Demographic Information

The demographic data from this study indicated that the role of District Coordinator was evenly distributed between participants in the Administration role (48.6%) and those in the Practitioner role (51.4%). For the purposes of this study, the Administration group referred to participants who were either Special Education Directors or Principals. The Practitioner group was comprised of District Coordinators in

the role of Teacher, Guidance Counselor, School Psychologist or “other.” Overall, 76.3% of participants had been serving as District Coordinators for more than two years. While more participants in the Administration role had acted as District Coordinator for more than two years (83.3%), there was a significant amount of Practitioners (71.8%) with similar experience. However, even with similar experience, 50% of the Practitioner group had administered the MI-Access assessment while only 15% of the Administration group reported that they had participated in assessment administration.

The fact that more Practitioners were administering the alternate assessments may account for their lower levels of agreement surrounding the assessment process (see Tables 10-16). Almost half of the Practitioner group (48%) identified themselves as classroom teachers which means they would be working with students on a daily basis. Flowers et al., (2005) noted that many teachers feel they lack the necessary resources needed to successfully administer alternate assessments. Examples of these resources include those that may be more readily available to District Coordinators in administrative roles such as clerical support, release time, and computer access.

While the role of the District Coordinator appears to influence perceptions, the amount of time involved in coordinating the alternate assessment process does not seem to affect overall satisfaction. The two groups of participants were quite similar with 79% of the Administration responses and 83% of Practitioners reporting that their duties as District Coordinator required less than 20 hours per assessment window. However, there were 19% of total participants who reported that the process took more than 20 hours per assessment window. For full time practitioners and administrators, this could represent a significant time burden during the school year. In addition, there are two assessment

windows for MI-Access during the academic year, which would mean that any time commitment reported by District Coordinators represents only half of the time they spend on the alternate assessment process.

Overall, 45% of participants reported being very familiar with the Michigan School Improvement Framework while 49% were somewhat familiar and 6% were not familiar with this document. The School Improvement Framework notes that:

The school improvement process, is deeply embedded in building, district and state planning and accountability systems, and has become an integral and necessary part of school and system reform. While this type of planning has existed for many years, recent state and federal mandates including annual testing directives and increased accountability have intensified the importance of this process and its outcomes (MDE - School Improvement Framework, 2006).

With less than half of District Coordinators being very familiar with this document, there may be negative affects on school reform in the area of alternate assessments for students with significant disabilities. The School Improvement Framework outlines the importance of assessment knowledge, alignment of curriculum to the state standards, and the use of data to inform instruction. These examples are all relevant and important to the successful implementation of the MI-Access Program. An increased understanding of the Michigan School Improvement Framework by District Coordinators may improve the implementation process and educational outcomes for this student population.

Demographic Data – Inclusion of all Students in Alternate Assessments Systems

The final question of the demographic section addressed whether District Coordinators agreed that all students with cognitive impairments should participate in state assessments based on Extended Grade Level Content Expectations (EGLCEs). Much like the survey item addressing the amount of time spent on the alternate assessment process, the Administration and Practitioner groups held similar beliefs regarding this survey item. This supports the idea that the District Coordinator's role within the school affects their perceptions of the MI-Access program more than the amount of time they spend on the process or their opinions regarding the inclusion of all students with cognitive impairments in alternate assessment systems.

Regarding whether or not all students should participate in state assessments, 69% of the Administration group and 68% of the Practitioner group either agreed or strongly agreed, while 30% of the Administration and 26% of the Practitioner disagreed/strongly disagreed with this assessment philosophy. Interestingly, even though IDEA required all states to implement some type of alternate assessment by July 1, 2000 (U.S. Department of Education – Title I, 2003), just over one third (31%) of District Coordinators in Michigan do not agree that all students who have cognitive impairments should be administered alternate assessments based on the State's Extended Grade Level Content Expectations.

The lack of consensus in the area of alternate assessments continues to be an issue in the field of instruction for students with significant disabilities. There are differing opinions as to whether these students can meet the academic achievement expectations created by each state (McGrew & Evens, 2004). Spooner & Browder (2006) stated,

“students who have physical and sensory challenges or challenging behavior may be especially susceptible to being underestimated for their academic potential” (p. 5). From the results of this survey item, it appears that almost one third of MI-Access District Coordinators question whether this student population should be part of statewide accountability systems.

If participants disagreed that all students with cognitive impairments should be administered alternate assessments, they were asked to provide reasoning for possible exclusions. The most common response (29.5%) was that students with cognitive impairments should be tested on functional/daily living skills rather than academic content. This finding is similar to a study conducted by Agran, et al. (2002) which identified that many teachers do not believe that accessing the general education curriculum is important for students with significant disabilities.

Focusing on academic curriculum (rather than functional) is a common concern for educators working with this student population (Browder, Spooner, Algozzine, et al., 2003). Therefore, it is not surprising that most District Coordinators addressed this issue as a potential reason for excluding students with cognitive impairments from assessment systems. However, the U.S. Department of Education (Title I, 2003) states that “an alternate assessment must be aligned with the State’s content standards, [and] must yield results separately in both reading/language arts and mathematics.” This can make transitioning to alternate assessments and increased accountability systems more difficult for districts that rely solely on a functional curriculum for students with significant disabilities. Browder, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, et al. (2003) identify five trends in the education of students with significant disabilities including (a) Developmental Model, (b)

Functional Curriculum, (c) Social Inclusion, (d) Self-Determination, and (e) General Curriculum Access. The General Curriculum Access trend has existed since the 1990s and is currently the focus in the field of Special Education. From the data collected in this study, it is evident that this philosophical change is still taking place among MI-Access District Coordinators.

The results from this specific survey item support the idea that many professionals in the field of Special Education are hesitant to incorporate academic curriculum into instruction for fear that functional curriculum will be underutilized (Spooner & Browder, 2006). In addition, research studies focusing on curriculum access for students with significant disabilities reflect similar opinions as those expressed by some MI-Access District Coordinators. Many educators believe that students with disabilities should not have the same learning expectations as other students. This belief is even more common when it concerns students with significant disabilities (Wehmeyer & Agran, 2006). By focusing exclusively on functional programming, students with cognitive impairments are not provided access to the general education curriculum. However, with the recent focus on standards and accountability in education, the “optimal target” for students with disabilities is to have their educational goals “linked to general education program” (Pugach & Wargner, 2001, p. 194).

The second most common reason (23.8%) identified by District Coordinators for not including all students in state assessment systems was due to the extreme variation in ability with this student population. This is a common opinion regarding the alternate assessment process. Because the specific learning objectives for students with significant disabilities are so individualized, utilizing standardized assessments is often viewed as

impossible (Gong & Marion, 2006). While there are certainly variations of ability within the label of “cognitively impaired,” the Michigan Department of Education has attempted to address this issue by creating three assessment levels within the MI-Access program. These assessments address the varying abilities of students who have severe or profound, moderate, and mild cognitive impairments (Michigan Department of Education – Technical Report, 2007)

The third most common response from District Coordinators regarding the inclusion of all students in alternate assessment systems was related to program development. Sixteen percent of participants reported that results from the MI-Access assessment were not useful for IEP Development or instruction and therefore students with cognitive impairments should not need to participate. Even though this is a concern for District coordinators, the utilization of standards-based IEPs for students with cognitive impairments represents an existing shift in the educational programming for this student population (Courtade-Little & Brower, 2005). The philosophy of a separate and functional curriculum for students with cognitive impairments has been the focus for many years (Browder, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, et al., 2003). These types of responses may represent the difficulty that educators are having as Special Education shifts into a more standards-based format and away from the physical segregation and separate curriculum.

Lastly, 12% of responses provided by participating District Coordinators focused on the issue of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and students with significant disabilities. According to the United States Department of Education (2005) and following the guidelines of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), school districts may

report up to 1% of proficient assessment scores from alternate assessments. The comments provided by District Coordinators regarding this reason for excluding some students from state assessment systems demonstrated possible confusion regarding the current federal guidelines. For example, one Coordinator wrote, “It is not fair that only 1% of severe students can take the alternate assessment. What happens if we have more than 1%? Then they have to take the MEAP? That will mess up our AYP!” and “We are a “magnet school” for severe cognitive kids so our school does not meet AYP because we can only have 1%.” From these comments, it is clear that these District Coordinators are misinformed as to the actual legislation surrounding the “1% cap.” If they were aware of the guidelines, they would understand that schools are allowed to have more than 1% of students take the test (however, only 1% total can be counted as proficient) and that alternate assessments should never be denied to students who need them. According to the Michigan Department of Education – Office of Educational Assessment and Accountability (Web Cast Q & A, 2006):

The 1% regulation explicitly states that the regulation does NOT limit the number of students taking alternate assessments based on *alternate achievement standards*. It ONLY limits the number of proficient alternate assessment scores at the district level to 1%. However, the regulation does recognize that there are situations where a district may exceed the 1% cap. This is why districts can apply for an exception to the 1% cap

In addition, these District Coordinators are misinformed that the 1% cap directly affects their school. The 1% cap is ultimately calculated at the state level (Golden Gate, 2006). Therefore, schools, such as center-based programs for students with significant

disabilities, are able to apply for waivers to increase their percentage. The Michigan Department of Education – Office of Educational Assessment and Accountability clearly states on the MI-Access webpage that:

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) has a cap of 1% at the state level *and* at the district level. If a district exceeds the 1% cap, the district may apply for an exception to the 1% cap. For example, an intermediate school district with a center program most likely will exceed the 1% cap at each of the grades assessed. The ISD can apply for an exception to the 1% cap, using the MDE application, which will be reviewed by the Michigan Department of Education's Office of Educational Assessment and Accountability (OEAA) and the Office of Special Education and Early Intervention (OSE-EIS).

It is not surprising that District Coordinators struggle to understand the requirements surrounding alternate assessments under NCLB. There continues to be additions and changes in federal policies, which in turn affect those responsible for assessment administration at the state level (Golden Gate, 2006). Individuals responsible for administration or coordination in Special Education face complex assessment legislation. However, it is important that MI-Access District Coordinators do not let misinterpretations of federal and state policy affect the appropriate inclusion of students with significant disabilities into accountability systems. In addition, school and district administration need to understand the guidelines surrounding NCLB and accountability systems in order for students to benefit from this legislation (Thurlow, 2005).

From the results of this study, 31% of MI-Access District Coordinators did not agree that that all students with cognitive impairments should participate in state

assessments. These Coordinators provided a variety of explanations to support their beliefs including the best interest of the student, teacher, and/or school. Whatever the reasoning surrounding the exclusion of this population, this finding supports the idea that more research is needed to understand why or why not educators support the use of alternate assessments for students with significant disabilities (Browder, et al., 2005).

Table 20

Recommendations – Demographic Information

Finding	Interpretation	Recommendation(s)
There were 12 District Coordinators who were not in an approved role for the position (i.e. administrative assistants, para-professionals).	There are acting District Coordinators who may not have the appropriate background for the position.	MDE – Notify all District Coordinators to reiterate the requirements necessary for the position. MDE – Require all District Coordinators to submit a “Qualification Sheet” to the MDE before beginning their role in the MI-Access Program.
Overall, 60% of District Coordinators have never administered the MI-Access Assessments (50% of the Practitioner group and 15% of the Administration group).	Many District Coordinators may not be familiar with the administration process. This may affect their ability to communicate with Assessment Administrators regarding the MI-Access Program	MDE and Districts – Require all District Coordinators to administer the assessment at least once per academic year.

Table 20 (Continued)

19% of District Coordinators reported that their role as MI-Access Coordinators required more than 20 hours per assessment window (there are two assessment windows per academic year)	For full time Practitioners and Administrators, this time commitment may create a burden that interferes with existing educational duties.	MDE – Incorporate possible suggestions from the field including: reducing assessment paperwork and streamlining the pre-referral process MDE – Survey Assessment Administrators for additional suggestions as to how the time commitment can be decreased. Districts – Offer assistance (i.e., additional staff, release time, etc.) to District Coordinators during MI-Access.
49% of District Coordinators reported being only “somewhat familiar” with the Michigan School Improvement Framework and an additional 5.9% were not familiar with this document.	The lack of familiarity with the Michigan School Improvement Framework is a possible concern due to the importance placed upon the three strands addressing assessment and increased accountability for all students. Lack of understanding may create negative effects on educational outcomes for students with disabilities.	MDE and Districts – Consider professional development for District Coordinators that links MI Access to the Michigan School Improvement Framework. Incorporate a focus on school change and improved educational outcomes for students with significant disabilities.
Just under one third (31%) of District Coordinators do not agree that all students who have cognitive impairments should be administered alternate assessments based on the State’s Extended Grade Level Content Expectations.	Even though IDEA required all states to implement some type of alternate assessment by July 2000, there are still many educators who do not see the value and/or appropriateness in this process. These beliefs may influence the outcomes of alternate assessments.	MDE – Continue to collect additional information from educators regarding their perceptions of alternate assessments and why (or why not) they believe they are appropriate. regarding alternate assessments during

Research Question One: Utilization of Resources

Data and Results. Schools have been collecting data regarding student performance for many years. However, the question that is crucial to the utilization of this data is whether it is being “put to productive purpose” (UMASS Donahue, 2004). According to participating MI-Access District Coordinators, School Districts in Michigan were familiar with the data and results that are provided by the Michigan Department of Education with 94% agreeing that they were familiar with this information. In addition, 80% of participants agreed that the MI-Access data and results are regularly disseminated to Assessment Administrators to use in the classrooms for instructional purposes. Interestingly, even though almost all Coordinators agreed that they were familiar with this information and disseminated it accordingly, only 39% of participants reported that their districts requested information back from Assessment Administrators as to how the data and results were being utilized with the classroom to improve instruction for students with cognitive impairments.

Defur (2002) addressed the assumptions that occur with the inclusion of students with disabilities in high-stakes testing. One of these assumptions is that high-stakes assessments will potentially create data-based decisions. These decisions include “improved teaching, enhanced educational opportunities and experiences, and academic and nonacademic success” (p.205). In addition, a University of Massachusetts – Donahue Institute study on promising practices in the field of Urban Special Education listed “the use of assessment data to inform decision making” as one of the practices that is important for schools to support the success of student with disabilities (UMASS Donahue, 2004). The fact that less than 40% of District Coordinators report that their

districts inquire as to how the MI-Access data and results are utilized to develop instruction denies this assumption and can potentially reduce the chances of improving educational outcomes.

Utilizing assessment data and results to create instructional change can be difficult (Thurlow, 2002). However, the lack of utilization of assessment data counteracts one of the main goals in standards-based reform, which focuses on instructional improvements (Thurlow, 2002; Ysseldyke et al., 2004, Flowers et al., 2005). With more than half of the participants in this study not utilizing the data from alternate assessments to improve instruction, the alignment between curriculum, instruction, and assessment may be compromised (Courtade-Little & Browder, 2005).

MI-Access Resources. The MI-Access resources addressed in this study included the Extended Grade Level Content Expectations (EGLCEs), Item Analysis Reports, and Released Item Booklets. While 66% of District Coordinators reported utilizing the EGLCEs to improve instruction for students with cognitive impairments, 34% were either not using this resource or were not sure if it was being utilized in their districts. It is important to note that EGLCEs play a significant role in the MI-Access program. These extended content expectations represent what is expected for students at each grade level while taking into consideration their ability level. In essence, the EGLCEs create the foundation of the MI-Access item development and are used as guidelines for writing appropriate assessment items. In addition, the Michigan Department of Education contracted for an external alignment study to determine how well the MI-Access Assessments align with the EGLCEs (The Assist, 2006).

Alignment studies are conducted to ensure that alternate assessments are developed based on the standards that are provided to teachers for the instruction of students with disabilities. This alignment is crucial for students with significant disabilities if they are going to have access to the general education curriculum (Flowers, Browder, Ahlgrim-Dezell, & Spooner, 2006). The Donahue Institute study also listed “a pervasive emphasis on curriculum alignment with the [state] frameworks” and “effective systems to support curriculum alignment” as two of the practices that are important for schools to support the success of students with disabilities in the area of state assessments (UMASS Donahue, 2004). However, this appears to be a concept that is either overlooked or not considered relevant by District Coordinators in the administration and implementation of the MI-Access Assessments.

As stated by Courtade-Little & Browder (2005) regarding recent changes in the education of students with significant disabilities, “as educators began to develop and administer alternate assessments, it soon became clear that for students to demonstrate the state standards targeted by these assessments, they needed instruction that was “aligned” to these standards” (p. 8). Typically, alignment of the curriculum is often an outcome of “high-stakes” testing (Ysseldyke et al., 2004) and in Michigan, the instruction of students with cognitive impairments should align to the EGLCEs. However, with only 66% of District Coordinators in the study reporting that they utilize the Extended Grade Level Content Expectations, there is a significant gap in the alignment between standards and instruction for students with cognitive impairments.

Participants reported limited use of the other two resources provided by the MDE for the MI-Access Program. Forty-eight percent of District Coordinators were either not

using, or not sure if they were using, the Item Analysis Reports in their districts.

Similarly, 57% of participants reported that they were not unitizing the Released Item Booklets to assist in assessment preparation for students with cognitive impairments. In addition, there were many comments from District Coordinators stating that they were unaware that these booklets were available for Assessment Administrators.

The underutilization of these resources may have an affect on overall satisfaction of the MI-Access process. If more District Coordinators were accessing the results and explanations of data provided in the Item Analysis Reports, there may be more understanding regarding the outcomes of the alternate assessment process. In addition, review of the Released Item Booklets would show Assessment Administrators the types of items that are used in the MI-Access assessments. This type of review could be especially beneficial for those who are new to the alternate assessment process.

Table 21

Recommendations – Research Question One

Finding	Interpretation	Recommendations
39% of participants reported that their districts requested information from Assessment Administrators as to how the data and results were being utilized within the classroom to improve instruction for students with cognitive impairments.	While familiar with the data and results provided by the MDE, many school districts do not inquire as to how this information is being utilized to guide curriculum and improve instruction – both of which are goals for alternate assessments.	Districts – Require all Assessment Administrators to report back to school administration as to how they are using assessment data in their classrooms. MDE and Districts – Provide professional development opportunities that focus on the use of data to inform instruction.
44% of participants were either not using the Extended Grade Level Content Expectations or were not sure if they were utilized in their districts.	The EGLCEs represent the state education expectations for students with significant disabilities. If this document is not used to guide instruction, it is likely that instruction will not be aligned to assessment.	Districts – Request that schools inquire as to how the EGLCEs are used in the classrooms. Districts – Include information regarding the EGLCEs in professional development opportunities (i.e., beginning of the school year or curriculum development meetings).
48% of District Coordinators were either not using, or not sure if they were using, the Item Analysis Reports. 57% of District Coordinators were either not using, or not sure if they were using, the Released Item Booklets.	These resources provided by the MDE to assist in the implementation and understanding of the MI-Access Program appear to be underutilized. This may lead to an increased amount of frustration and misinterpretation on the part of Assessment Administrators.	MDE and Districts – Request that schools inquire as to how the Item Analysis Reports and Released Item Booklets are used by Assessment Administrators. Include information regarding these resources in professional development opportunities (i.e., beginning of the school year or curriculum development meetings)

Research Question Two: Communication and Collaboration

Research question two addressed the communication and collaboration both within school districts as well as between districts and the MI-Access Developers. Overall, District Coordinators reported that they had adequate communication both from Assessment Administrators regarding MI-Access and between themselves and the MI-Access program and/or the Michigan Department of Education – Office of Educational Assessment and Accountability. However, there was less agreement as to whether Assessment Administrators within the district were collaborating with one another regarding MI-Access. Specifically, the Practitioner group reported the least amount of agreement ($M = 2.22$) while the Administration group had a mean score of 2.38 pertaining to Assessment Administrator collaboration within their districts.

In order to obtain appropriate alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, there needs to be successful communication and collaboration both within the field of special education and between special education and general education. Interestingly, communication and collaboration were both listed as in the “six best practice themes” regarding successful inclusive practices in middle and secondary schools (Villa, Thousand, Nevin, Liston, 2005). Regarding the use of collaboration in the Villa et al. study, collaboration was reported by all interviewees as “the key to student success” in reference to appropriate inclusion for students with disabilities. The same study noted that general educators typically have the background in content while those in special education have experience in strategies and accommodations. A combination of both of these knowledge bases is essential for the successful implementation of alternate assessments (Spooner & Browder, 2006). While the skills of effective communication

and collaboration are essential to effective inclusionary practices (Titone, 2005), it is clear that they will also benefit the outcomes of alternate assessments for students with significant disabilities.

As previously discussed in this study, in order for students to be successful on alternate assessments, there must be alignment among curriculum, instruction, and assessment. This involves collaboration and communication both within special education and between special and general education teachers in order to provide adequate access to the general education curriculum (Courtade-Little & Browder, 2005). In a study conducted by Furney, Hasazi, and Clark-Keefe (2005) regarding the impact of state policies on special education, it was noted that professional development activities associated with curriculum alignment and development had contributed to increased collaboration between special and general education.

In this study, the survey items regarding District Coordinators' communication and collaboration practices show limited interaction between those involved in the MI-Access Program. However, the survey questions in this area were very specific regarding who was communicating and/or collaborating (i.e. Assessment Administrators with Coordinators). Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether the lower mean score represent an overall lack of these particular practices.

There is little research regarding the role of communication and collaboration in the alternate assessment process. The fact that the Practitioner group reports increased collaboration may be a result of their more common role as Assessment Administrators (50% of Practitioners vs. 15% of Administration). Because they are more actively involved in the assessment process, Practitioners may utilize their colleagues (i.e. special

and general education teachers) more than District Coordinators in the role of Administration. Whether District Coordinators are administering the assessment or overseeing the process, communication and collaboration are very important. Koppang (2004) noted, “improved communication among all teachers in the school provides professional educators with another tool for effectively enhancing the learning of all students in the classroom, especially student with disabilities” (p. 161). In addition, effective communication within the school increases feeling of “ownership” regarding the new programs and practices (Duffy, 2008) making it essential for effective policy implementation.

Table 22

Recommendations – Research Question Two

Finding	Interpretation	Recommendation(s)
91% of participants agreed that Assessment Administrators contacted them, as needed, with questions regarding MI-Access.	The role of District Coordinator is utilized by Assessment Administrators to gain information and clarification regarding MI-Access.	MDE and Districts – Continue to train District Coordinators and provide them with the necessary materials to distribute to Assessment Administrators.
88% of District Coordinators reported that they communicate with the MI-Access Program Developers and/or the MDE to address questions or concerns in the MI-Access Program. Negative comments were related to the inability to contact MI-Access professionals via phone.	The communication process between MI-Access and Michigan School Districts via the District Coordinator is effective and beneficial for alternate assessment implementation.	MDE – Continue to allow communication through both email and telephone. MDE – Possibly add more “Frequently Asked Questions” to the MI-Access website to reduce the number of incoming inquiries.
40% of District Coordinators did not agree, or were not sure, if Assessment Administrators in their districts were collaborating regarding the MI-Access process.	The lack of collaboration may be connected to the time constraints placed on Assessment Administrators for completion of the assessment window. However, there were also many comments from District Coordinators stating that they were the only person involved with MI-Access in their district so collaboration was not necessary.	Districts – If there are multiple District Coordinators, allow release time during each assessment window for collaboration. MDE – Create an online forum for collaboration via the Internet across districts. Can be used to share ideas, address questions, etc.

Research Question Three: District Coordinators’ Perceptions

As stated in Chapter 4, the majority of District Coordinators felt knowledgeable regarding their role in the MI-Access program with an overall mean score of 3.30. There

was also very little variation between the Administration group and the Practitioner group in this area ($M = 3.22$ and 3.28 respectively). However, when asked whether they believed they had the *background* necessary to successfully coordinate the alternate assessment process, fewer District Coordinators from the Administration group agreed ($M = 3.26$ vs. 3.30). This difference may be attributed to the type of education and training District Coordinators have had in the area of special education. Typically, Special Education Directors have a strong background in educational policy and legal issues, but may lack experience in classroom instruction. This limitation could potentially include the alternate assessment process, which would raise the level of agreement for the Practitioner group. Even with this difference, the Administration group was still confident that they had the background necessary to coordinate the MI-Access alternate assessment program.

Another question in the area of District Coordinators' personal role in the MI-Access process addressed whether they delegated additional coordinators at the school level. The overall mean score for this survey item was 2.68 with a significant difference between the Administration and the Practitioner groups (with the Practitioner group reporting more agreement). From the comments provided by participants, it was clear that many districts did not have enough students with significant disabilities taking the MI-Access assessments to need this type of multi-level coordination. It would have been beneficial to ask participants how many schools within their districts administered MI-Access. Without this information, the results from this survey item were difficult to interpret.

There was almost identical agreement between the Administration group ($M = 2.73$) and the Practitioner group ($M = 2.76$) regarding whether their districts provided adequate *training* in the MI-Access process. However, the Administration group was more likely to report that Assessment Administrators had sufficient *release time* for professional development related to MI-Access ($M = 2.63$ vs. 2.51 respectively). This finding may be attributed to the fact that more participants in the Practitioner group have actually administered the assessment. Participants from this group may have a better idea as to the amount of time and resources that are necessary to complete this task. Browder, Fallin, et al. (2003) identified both time and training as potential resources that may influence student outcomes on alternate assessments. In addition, the Practitioner groups may experience more challenges with the alternate assessment process. For example, due to the shortage of teachers in the area of significant disabilities, there may be teachers who are new to the field and are still struggling with their new roles in addition to the implementation of alternate assessments (Browder, Karvonen, et al., 2005).

Open Ended Questions – MI-Access Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths. District Coordinators provided a variety of responses identifying the strengths of the MI-Access program. The most common response was ‘student centered’ with 40% of participants indicating that the implementation of this assessment system allows all students to take part in accountability systems. This is a vague assertion and there was little elaboration in the comments provided by District Coordinators. However, having participants identify this idea can be seen as a positive reaction to the goals of alternate assessments. By including students with significant disabilities in alternate assessment systems, this student population is given more consideration in the policy

making that surrounds state, district, and school educational programs (Browder, Spooner, Algozzine, et al., 2003)

Interestingly, there were no District Coordinators who identified the need to increase expectations or academic standards for students with cognitive impairments as a strength of MI-Access. In the literature and research surrounding alternate assessments and increased accountability, many professionals in the field identify increased educational expectations as significant goal and often an outcome of the process (Angran et al., 2002, Browder, Fallin, et al., 2003; McGrew & Evans, 2004). Quenemoen and Thurlow (2007) listed “high expectations for all students” as one of their five “big ideas” surrounding learning opportunities through alternate assessments. They noted, “all children benefit when schools have high expectations for what each student is expected to know and be able to do” (p. 3). In addition, Perner (2006) reported that high expectations for students with significant disabilities and their meaningful involvement in alternate assessment is “highly supported” by educators and special education organizations. However, out of the 332 MI-Access District Coordinators who responded to the open-ended question regarding the strengths Michigan’s alternate assessment program, not one response made reference to the idea of increasing or changing expectations for students with cognitive impairments.

It is not clear as to why 40% of District Coordinators reported “inclusion of all students into accountability systems” as a strength of the MI-Access Program, but did not identify increasing expectations as an outcome of this inclusion. While the literature identifies this as an essential goal of alternate assessments system, MI-Access District

Coordinators may not believe that inclusion will change expectations for this student population.

Two of the categories created from District Coordinators' responses regarding the strengths of MI-Access focused on both the student and the teacher. Participants identified consistent progress monitoring (17.5%) and making teachers accountable for the learning of students with cognitive impairments (7.5%) as strengths of the MI-Access program. However, as discussed earlier in reference to research question one, less than 40% of District Coordinators report utilizing the MI-Access Data and results to improve instruction for students with cognitive disabilities. It would be beneficial if educators used the data from alternate assessments for both progress monitoring and instructional improvements. In doing so, the time invested by Assessment Administrators (excessive time commitment was considered a weakness of the MI-Access program) may be more beneficial for students and teachers (Browder, Spooner, Algozzine, et al., 2003).

Weaknesses. MI-Access District Coordinators identified a variety of weaknesses surrounding the state's alternate assessment process. There were 304 participants who chose to respond to this survey item. Fifty-one percent of participants reported that the MI-Access assessments were not relevant and/or appropriate for students with cognitive impairments. It is possible that MI-Access District Coordinators do not have access to appropriate research regarding the alternate assessment process for students with significant disabilities. Without information that is considered functional to their role in education, it may be difficult for them to find relevance in the MI-Access Program. Unfortunately, there has been little research in the area of technical adequacy and alternate assessments (Yovanoff & Tindal, 2007) which may also influence whether or

not it is perceived as appropriate for this student population. This limited research base may increase District Coordinator's negative perceptions regarding the relevance of the MI-Access program.

Another possible explanation for District Coordinators not finding relevance in the MI-Access assessments may be related to the recent philosophical shift in the instructional practices for students with significant disabilities. As noted by Browder, Spooner, and Ahlgrim-Dezell, et al., (2003), special education is in a new era, which focuses on access to the general education curriculum for students with significant disabilities. The shifting philosophy affects curriculum, instruction, and assessment. This change in practice may account, in part, for the reason half of participating District Coordinators view "lack of relevance" as a weakness of MI-Access. In addition, the responses from District Coordinators regarding this topic are most likely affected as "curriculum experts have noted that philosophy often serves as the basis for educational decisions (Browder, Spooner, and Ahlgrim-Dezell, et al., 2003)

The second most common weakness identified by 32.2% of participants was related to the amount of time and paperwork the MI-Access assessments required. This is a continuing theme in the research surrounding alternate assessments as teachers struggle with the requirements involved in successful implementation (Browder, Karvonen, et al., 2005; Flowers, Ahlgrim-Dezell, et al., 2005). The third and final category in reference to the most significant weakness of the MI-Access program was related to students with mild cognitive impairments. Seven percent of participants identified the need for an assessment that is more appropriate for student with higher levels of academic functioning. These responses focused on the need for an assessment that will address the

ability level of students who are not able to take the general state assessment (MEAP) with accommodations, but the highest level of MI-Access (Functional Independence) is not challenging for this population.

Currently, the Michigan Department of Education – Office of Educational Assessment and Accountability is working on an assessment that is intended to incorporate this student population. This will be an alternate assessment based on modified achievement standards. Guidelines from the Department of Education (U.S. Department of Education – Modified Achievement Standards, 2007) identifies these students as those who have a disability that has “precluded [them] from achieving proficiency, as demonstrated by objective evidence of the student’s performance and whose progress is such that, even if significant growth occurs, the student’s IEP team is reasonably certain that the student will not achieve grade-level proficiency within the year covered by the IEP.” Each state will be allowed to offer this assessment to an additional 2% of the student population and have the scores count as proficient for Adequate Yearly Progress. By developing a modified alternate assessment, this weakness identified by MI-Access District Coordinators will be addressed and possibly corrected by the Michigan Department of Education.

Table 23

Recommendations – Research Question Three

Finding	Interpretation	Recommendation(s)
93% of participants reported that they felt knowledgeable in their role as District Coordinator and 90% were confident that they had the background (education and/or training) necessary to implement the MI-Access Program.	Overall, the role of District Coordinator appears to be filled by individuals who feel confident in their ability to implement the MI-Access Program. The preparation provided for this role is producing excellent results (as seen through self-reported data).	MDE and Districts – Continue to provide the necessary training and resources necessary to maintain District Coordinators knowledge in the MI-Access Program.
65% of District Coordinators reported that Assessment Administrators were allowed adequate release time for professional development related to MI-Access. The Administration group was more likely to agree with this statement ($M = 2.63$ vs. 2.51).	Even with the majority of District Coordinators in agreement, more than one third of believe that increased released time for professional development would be beneficial. They may be indentifying this area as a need due to reported frustrations and/or confusion from Assessment Administrators regarding the MI-Access process.	MDE – Provide professional development opportunities throughout the year (summer too) to better accommodate district release time. Districts – Survey Assessment Administrators to determine what information would be helpful during PD opportunities. Communicate to the MDE for planning.
70% of District Coordinators reported that Assessment Administrators received adequate training in the MI-Access process.	Almost one third of District Coordinators believe that Assessment Administrators need more training in the MI-Access process. This may affect the quality of assessment administration (especially considering that the Practitioner group reported even lower levels of agreement) and ultimately assessment outcomes.	MDE – Offer detailed assessment administration training sessions during MEAP/MI-Acess Fall Conferences. Districts – Survey Assessment Administrators to determine what areas of training would be helpful. Communicate to the MDE for planning.

MI School Improvement Framework and Essential AA Process Components

The Michigan School Improvement Framework was used to categorize survey items. The data from the School Improvement Framework items showed the lowest levels of agreement from District Coordinators in the Teaching for Learning Strand with an overall mean of 2.68. The focus of this strand is curriculum, instruction, and assessments. Specifically, the introduction to this strand reads, “the school holds high expectations for all students, identifies essential curricular content, makes certain it is sequenced appropriately and is taught effectively...Assessments used are aligned to curricular content and are used to guide instructional decisions and monitor student learning” (MDE - School Improvement Framework, 2006).

The use of alternate assessments to guide instructional decisions and monitor student learning, as outlined in the School Improvement Framework, was not evident in participants’ responses. While the majority of District Coordinators were familiar with this information (94%), only 39% reported that their districts requested Assessment Administrators to identify how they used the data and results to improve student outcomes.

The highest level of agreement from District Coordinators was in the Personnel & Professional Learning Strand ($M = 2.93$). This Strand identifies notes that schools in Michigan should have, “highly qualified personnel who continually acquire and use skills, knowledge, attitudes and beliefs necessary to create a culture with high levels of learning for all” (MDE - School Improvement Framework, 2006).

The data from District Coordinators regarding their overall knowledge (93% agreement) and background (90% agreement) in the MI-Access process supports this

statement from the School Improvement Framework. These results indicate that MI-Access District Coordinators, in self-reporting data, consider themselves highly qualified in the area of Michigan's alternate assessment program. In the Personnel & Professional Learning Strand of the School Improvement Framework, this knowledge would support the goal of "creating a culture with high levels of learning for all."

The Essential Alternate Assessment Process Components were created by the researcher to further categorize survey items. Similar to the analysis of the Michigan School Improvement Framework Strands, MI-Access District Coordinators reported the highest levels of agreement with the Professional Development and Training component ($M = 3.08$). The majority of Coordinators report being knowledgeable and having the background necessary to successfully implement the MI-Access program.

Unfortunately, the two lowest levels of agreement were in the areas of Utilization of Resources and Utilization of Data and Results ($M = 2.29$ and 2.85 respectively). As discussed earlier in this chapter, this has the potential to create a disconnect in the overall alignment of assessment, curriculum, and instruction for students with cognitive impairments (Courtade-Little & Browder, 2005). Overall, it appears that MI-Access District Coordinators are knowledgeable as to the requirements of the alternate assessment process. However, a significant percentage do not incorporate the resources (including assessment data) provided by the Michigan Department of Education.

Limitations

Several limitations affect the outcomes of this study. First, while there was an acceptable response rate (64.4%) from District Coordinators, this percentage is not representative of all of the districts implementing MI-Access in Michigan. Participation

in surveys is typically influenced by the participant's interest in sharing information regarding the topic of study (Beatty & Herrmann, 2002). Therefore, responses may have been more numerous from District Coordinators who were having issues with the alternate assessment process and wanted to utilize the survey as a forum to express their opinions. Second, the results of this study provided only the perspective of MI-Access District Coordinators in the form of self-reported data. While these individuals represent an important part of the MI-Access program, their perceptions may not be representative of the actual alternate assessment process.

The third limitation of this study is related to its generalizability. This research was conducted as an evaluative study based on the alternate assessment program used in one state. While the findings may be significant to Michigan, they may not be easily generalized to other states due to the unique nature of each state's alternate assessment program (i.e., portfolio, checklist, on-demand, etc.). In addition, the researcher developed this survey instrument specifically for the MI-Access program in Michigan. Therefore, its relevance to other states may be minimal.

Future Research

The need for continued research in the area of alternate assessments exists on multiple levels. Nationally, the Government Accounting Office reported that numerous states are experiencing difficulty with the implementation of alternate assessments and meeting the guidelines of NCLB. In addition, these states are in need of assistance as they search for resources to guide the process of including all students in state alternate assessment systems (GAO, 2005). Research focusing on how states are developing,

implementing and utilizing the data from alternate assessments would be useful to improve the overall outcomes for students with significant disabilities.

While Michigan has an established and peer approved alternate assessment system, it is important that “efforts continue to ensure alternate assessments, and students’ opportunity to learn adequate curriculum, align to state standards and reliably assess student performance” (Katsiyannis, Zhang, Ryan, & Jones, 2007, p. 161). Specifically in Michigan, this would involve Assessment Administrators utilizing the Extended Grade Level Content Expectations (EGLCEs) to align the curriculum for students with cognitive impairments with the general education population. Even with understanding the significance of the EGLCEs and their role in the MI-Access process, 44% of Coordinators reported that their districts do not utilize this resource to align instruction for students with significant disabilities. Future research studies identifying which districts use the EGLCEs and how they incorporate them into instructional practices would be a beneficial endeavor. Understanding how, or if, assessment affects instruction for students with significant disabilities has the potential to improve the alternate assessment process for both Assessment Administrators and students.

In addition, future research needs to focus on ways to provide Assessment Administrators, specifically those in the Practitioner group, with strategies to utilize alternate assessment resources in daily instruction (Flowers, et al., 2005). In Michigan, this would include increasing the understanding and incorporation of the MI-Access data and results as well as the resources providing the Department of Education. In doing so, Assessment Administrators may better understand the purpose and goals of alternate assessments for students with cognitive impairments. This will potentially improve

educational outcomes for students who utilize alternate assessments. Overall, it is imperative that educators work to improve the overall implementation and outcomes of alternate assessments as they represent the achievement levels and reporting criteria under NCLB (Browder, Karvonen, et al., 2005).

Future research analyzing several sub-categories of this study may also provide useful information regarding a state's alternate assessment system. Identifying possible differences in the areas of (a) grade level of instruction provided by District Coordinators and/or Assessment Administrators (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school), (b) years of experience reported by participants, and (c) type of instructional certification held by District Coordinators and/or Assessment Administrators could provide useful information both within and between Administration and Practitioner groups. Another sub-category that would benefit from continued research in the area of alternate assessments relates to how the process is conducted within charter schools. Questions including, "Do charter schools express similar concerns (as public schools) regarding the alternate assessment process?" and "Do charter schools utilize resources differently than public schools in relation to alternate assessments?" may provide useful information for both types of institutions.

Finally, future research needs to focus on the long term effects of an academic curriculum for students with significant disabilities. If curriculum, instruction, and assessment should be aligned, then it is important to understand the impact of current changes in special education on students with significant disabilities. In order to do so, longitudinal studies focusing on this population and the implementation of academic curriculum would need to address important questions such as, "Does this change in

curriculum increase personal independence?” “Does it affect vocational opportunities?” and “Does an academic focus increase expectations and/or change perceptions regarding students with significant disabilities?” By understanding the outcomes of “access to the general education curriculum” and increased accountability for these students, educators would have more information to guide instruction and assessment.

Conclusion

This study identified several overall themes surrounding the MI-Access program in Michigan. Specifically, the resources provided by the Michigan Department of Education appear to be underutilized in the alternate assessment process. As discussed earlier, these issues create a variety of challenges in the areas of improved instruction and access to the general education curriculum for students with significant disabilities. This is an issue that needs to be addressed as the requirements of NCLB regarding assessment and accountability continue to challenge school districts and the students who rely on them for appropriate educational opportunities (Katsiyannis et al., 2007).

Beals (2003) noted, “Through carefully constructed evaluations, educators are able to reflect on themselves and on their practice...Such an evaluation allows for the incorporation of stakeholder values, concerns, issues and differences. Such an evaluation allows for positive change.” As special education moves into a new era of accountability, inclusion, and awareness, the researcher hopes that this study will be an important contribution to helping administrators, practitioners, policymakers, and researchers to better understand the process of alternate assessments – a process that may include both positive and negative outcomes for students with significant disabilities.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Overview of MI-Access Student Populations

Figure 1 Overview of MI-Access Participation and Supported Independence Students		
	Level of Independence: Participation	Level of Independence: Supported Independence
Student Characteristics	Have, or function as if they have, severe or profound cognitive impairments that preclude their ability to (or our skills to ascertain their abilities to) generalize learning.	Have, or function as if they have, moderate cognitive impairments that seriously impact their ability to generalize or transfer learning.
Anticipated Life Roles	Are expected to participate in major adult living roles. Will require extensive, ongoing support in all areas of functioning throughout life. Will be dependent on others for most, if not all, daily living needs.	Are expected to achieve supported independence in adulthood. Will require some supervision throughout lives, but can learn skills to maximize independence.
Curriculum	Focuses on the non-core Michigan Model Content Standards (career and employability, technology, health, and physical education). In addition, academic content standards that are provided in the <i>Michigan Curriculum Framework</i> and the Extended Grade Level Content Expectations, Extended Benchmarks, and Extended High School Content Expectations, presented in real-life contexts.	Based on a combination of the non-core Michigan Model Content Standards (career and employability, technology, health, and physical education) and academic content standards found in the <i>Michigan Curriculum Framework</i> , and the Extended Grade Level Content Expectations, Extended Benchmarks, and Extended High School Content Expectations, presented in real-life contexts.
Likely State Assessment	MI-Access Participation	MI-Access Supported Independence

Appendix B

MI-Access Scoring Rubric

MI-Access Participation V1.5 Scoring Rubric	
Score Point	Definition
3	Responds correctly with no teacher assistance
2	Responds correctly after teacher provides verbal/physical cues
1	Responds correctly after teacher provides physical assistance and/or modeling, short of hand-over-hand assistance
Condition Code**	Definition
A	Incorrect Response
B	Resists/refuses to participate
C	Teacher provides hand-over-hand assistance
**All condition codes result in no points.	

MI-Access Supported Independence V1.5 Scoring Rubric	
Score Point	Definition
3	Responds correctly with no teacher assistance
2	Responds correctly after teacher provides verbal/physical cues
Condition Code**	Definition
A	Incorrect Response
B	Resists/refuses to participate
C	Teacher provides hand-over-hand assistance
**All condition codes result in no points.	

Appendix C

Sample of Extended Grade Level Content Expectations

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STRAND: READING		
<i>Domain: Narrative Text (NT)</i>		
Level of Independence (Full, SI, P) Assessable at: (Classroom/LEA/ISD/State)	Elementary School (Linked to Grade 4)*	Middle School (Linked to Grade 7)*
ELA Grade Level Content Expectation v.12.05	R.NT.04.02 Identify and describe the structure, elements, and purpose of a variety of narrative genre including poetry, myths, legends, fantasy, and adventure.	R.NT.07.02 Analyze the structure, elements, style, and purpose of narrative genre including mystery, poetry, memoir, drama, myths, and legends.
Supported Independence Extended Grade Level Content Expectation Classroom/LEA/ISD/State	R.NT.e.SLEG02 Identify a variety of narrative text genre, (e.g., stories, poetry, and songs).	R.NT.m.SLEG02 Identify and describe a variety of narrative text genre, (e.g., stories, poetry, and songs).
Participation Extended Grade Level Content Expectation Classroom/LEA/ISD/State	R.NT.e.P.EG02 Differentiate between two types of narrative text genre, (e.g., stories, poetry, and songs).	R.NT.m.P.EG02 Differentiate between two types of narrative text genre, (e.g., stories, poetry, and songs).

Appendix D

Survey

1. Consent

I am currently a Ph.D. Candidate in Special Education at Michigan State University. I am interested in alternate assessment systems for students with cognitive impairments and have been involved with the development of the MI-Access Alternate Assessment Program in Michigan.

At this time, I am conducting a research study examining the MI-Access Program and would greatly appreciate your input. As a District Coordinator, you play a very important role in the alternate assessment process. This survey will be sent to approximately 800 MI-Access District Coordinators throughout the state.

The purpose of this research is to conduct an evaluative study of Michigan's alternate assessment process. The researcher will not share this information with any other party and results will be used for research purposes only. Your confidentiality will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. If indicators are used in publications and/or presentations, they will be limited to school district size and general geographic locations.

While you may not directly benefit from participation in this research study, your input could potentially influence its recommendations. This evaluative study of the MI-Access Program may discover areas of improvement that could lead to positive educational change for students, teachers, and or school administrators. There are no known risks associated with this study.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate in the survey or, if you choose to begin the survey, you may exit at any time without consequence. If you decide to participate, your responses to this survey will be attached to the email you use for your work as a MI-Access District Coordinator. However, to ensure confidentiality, your name and district will not be used in any publication and/or presentation.

All responses are confidential and only the researcher will have access to the survey data using a password-protected account in Survey Monkey. Any identifying information will be stored with the data and available only to the researcher. It will be securely stored in a locked home office cabinet for a minimum of five years after publication. Electronic copies of the data will be stored under password protection on the researcher's home computer for a minimum of five years after publication. At that time, the files will be deleted from the hard drive and the device will be restored to ensure that there are no remaining files.

If you have any questions regarding this study, such as scientific issues, how to do any part of it, or to report an injury, please contact the researcher, Angela Dalhoe, at 716 Dadson Dr. Lansing, MI – dalhoean@msu.edu – (517-887-6369) or the research advisor for this study, Dr. Troy Mariage, at mariaget@msu.edu – (517-432-1981). If you have any questions or concerns regarding your role and rights as a research participant, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Director of MSU's Human Research Protection Programs, Dr. Peter Vasilenko, at 517-355-2180, FAX 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu, or regular mail at: 202 Olds Hall, MSU, East Lansing, MI 48824.

I sincerely hope that you will complete this survey. The information you provide regarding your role in the MI-Access Program will greatly assist in my research on the use of alternate assessments. This survey consists of 23 multiple-choice questions and 4 "open-ended" questions. Your participation in this survey should take less than twenty minutes. For your convenience, you do not need to complete this survey in one session.

You indicate your voluntary agreement to participate in this research and have your answers included in the data set by completing and returning the attached survey.

2. Demographics

1. How long have you been a MI-Access District Coordinator?

This is my first year

2 years

More than 2 years

2. What is your official role in the district where your are coordinator?

Teacher

Principal

Special Education Director

School Psychologist

Guidance Counselor

Other (please specify)

3. Do you currently administer the MI-Access Assessments?

Yes

No

I have in the past, but not this year.

4. Do you receive any compensation for your role as a MI-Access District Coordinator?

Stipend

Release time

Additional staff assistance

No, being a MI-Access District Coordinator is in addition to my regular responsibilities.

Other (please specify)

5. If you were to estimate the time you spend on combined tasks (e.g., receiving, delivering, packaging, and returning materials) during one assessment window, how many hours are needed to successfully complete your requirements as a MI-Access District Coordinator?

1-10 hours per assessment window

11-20 hours per assessment window

21-30 hours per assessment window

31-40 hours per assessment window

40+ hours per assessment window

6. How would you describe the geographic location of your district?

Urban (more than 25,000)

Mid-size City (15,000 - 24,999)

Suburban (2,000 - 14,999)

Small Town/Rural (less than 2000)

I provide services in a charter school.

I provide services at the ISD level.

7. How familiar are you with the Michigan School Improvement Framework?

Very familiar

Somewhat familiar

Not familiar

8. Do you agree that all students who have cognitive impairments should be administered alternate state assessments based on Extended Grade Level Content Expectations (EGLCEs)?

4 - Strongly Agree

3 - Agree

2 - Disagree

1 - Strongly Disagree

0 – Don't Know/Not Sure

If you disagree, what do you believe are the exceptions?

3. Strand I – Teaching for Learning

1. As a District Coordinator, I am familiar with the MI-Access data and results provided to my district by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE).

4 - Strongly Agree
3 - Agree
2 - Disagree
1 - Strongly Disagree
0 – Don't Know/Not Sure
Comments

2. My district adequately disseminates the MI-Access data and results to Assessment Administrators to use for instructional purposes.

4 - Strongly Agree
3 - Agree
2 - Disagree
1 - Strongly Disagree
0 – Don't Know/Not Sure
Comments

3. My district regularly requests information from Assessment Administrators as to how the MI-Access data and results are being used to improve instruction in the classroom.

4 - Strongly Agree
3 - Agree
2 - Disagree
1 - Strongly Disagree
0 – Don't Know/Not Sure
Comments

4. My district utilizes the Michigan Extended Grade Level Content Expectations (EGLCEs) to align instruction for students with cognitive impairments with the State Grade Level Content Expectations (GLCEs).

4 - Strongly Agree
3 - Agree
2 - Disagree
1 - Strongly Disagree
0 – Don't Know/Not Sure
Comments

5. My district utilizes the Item Analysis Reports provided by the MDE to improve instruction for students with cognitive impairments.

- 4 - Strongly Agree
- 3 - Agree
- 2 - Disagree
- 1 - Strongly Disagree
- 0 – Don't Know/Not Sure
- Comments

4. Strand II – Leadership

1. As a District Coordinator, I consider myself knowledgeable regarding the coordination and successful implementation process of the MI-Access Program in my district.

- 4 - Strongly Agree
- 3 - Agree
- 2 - Disagree
- 1 - Strongly Disagree
- 0 – Don't Know/Not Sure
- Comments

2. Assessment Administrators in my district effectively complete their tasks in the MI-Access Program process (e.g., receiving, administering, and returning assessment materials).

- 4 - Strongly Agree
- 3 - Agree
- 2 - Disagree
- 1 - Strongly Disagree
- 0 – Don't Know/Not Sure
- Comments

3. My district provides an adequate amount of release time to Assessment Administrators to participate in professional development related to the MI-Access Program.

- 4 - Strongly Agree
- 3 - Agree
- 2 - Disagree
- 1 - Strongly Disagree
- 0 – Don't Know/Not Sure
- Comments

4. My district utilizes the Released Item Booklets provided by the MDE to improve instruction for students with cognitive impairments.

- 4 - Strongly Agree
- 3 - Agree
- 2 - Disagree
- 1 - Strongly Disagree
- 0 – Don't Know/Not Sure
- Comments

5. My district designates MI-Access Coordinators for each building to organize the dissemination, administration, and collection of the MI-Access Assessments.

- 4 - Strongly Agree
- 3 - Agree
- 2 - Disagree
- 1 - Strongly Disagree
- 0 – Don't Know/Not Sure
- Comments

5. Strand III – Personnel & Professional Learning

1. As a District Coordinator, I believe I have the background necessary (e.g., assessment and/or special education training) to successfully coordinate and manage the process of the MI-Access Assessment Program.

- 4 - Strongly Agree
- 3 - Agree
- 2 - Disagree
- 1 - Strongly Disagree
- 0 – Don't Know/Not Sure
- Comments

2. My district provides adequate training to Assessment Administrators regarding the administration of MI-Access Assessments.

- 4 - Strongly Agree
- 3 - Agree
- 2 - Disagree
- 1 - Strongly Disagree
- 0 – Don't Know/Not Sure
- Comments

3. In my district, Assessment Administrators contact me with questions and/or concerns regarding the MI-Access Program.

- 4 - Strongly Agree
- 3 - Agree
- 2 - Disagree
- 1 - Strongly Disagree
- 0 – Don't Know/Not Sure
- Comments

4. As a District Coordinator, I communicate with the MI-Access Program Developers to answer questions and clarify assessment issues (e.g., calling the MI-Access Hot-line or the MDE-ASWDP offices).

- 4 - Strongly Agree
- 3 - Agree
- 2 - Disagree
- 1 - Strongly Disagree
- 0 – Don't Know/Not Sure
- Comments

5. In my district, Assessment Administrators regularly collaborate with each other to improve the alternate assessment administration process.

- 4 - Strongly Agree
- 3 - Agree
- 2 - Disagree
- 1 - Strongly Disagree
- 0 – Don't Know/Not Sure
- Comments

6. Open-Ended Questions

1. Are there changes that could help improve the implementation process of the MI-Access Program (e.g., before, during, and after the assessment)?
2. Considering your response to the previous question, what is the most effective way for your recommendations to be implemented?
3. What do you consider the most significant strengths of the MI-Access Assessment Program?
4. What do you consider the most significant weaknesses of the MI-Access Assessment Program?

Appendix E

Sample Coding of Open-Ended Questions

MI-Access Strengths

Participant Comment	Code	Category
It allows all students to be part of assessments	Inclusion	Includes all students in accountability systems
It makes assessments fair for special ed. Students	Equality	Includes all students in accountability systems
Makes record keeping easier to see student progress	Collecting data	Allows consistent progress monitoring
We can see how these students are doing from year to year	Monitoring	Allows consistent progress monitoring
It is clear and easy to administer	Assessment ease	MI-Access is well organized and easy to administer
MI-Access hotline and office are helpful – I can always get straight answers that are easy to understand and use	Assistance from MDE	MI-Access is well organized and easy to administer
Finally teachers of these kid have to show they are teaching	Teacher Accountability	Makes teachers accountable for learning
CI Teachers have to be part of assessments	Teacher Involvement	Makes teachers accountable for learning
The whole process is irresponsible and irrelevant	Weakness	Off topic
I don't think there is a strength	No answer	Off topic
It is fun for the students	Other	Other
I enjoy having the one on one time with my students when I give the test	Other	Other

Appendix F

Sample Coding of Open-Ended Questions – Weaknesses

MI-Access Weaknesses

Participant Comment	Code	Category
The items on this test is not what the students do in their classes	Relevancy	Not relevant/appropriate to students needs
There is no reason why these types of kids should have to take this test	Fairness/Appropriateness	Not relevant/appropriate to students needs
It takes so much time to get all of the assessment materials together and to give the test. My other student suffer because of this assessment	Time	Too time consuming/Too much paperwork
The amount of paperwork is ridiculous. It is a waste of teacher time and natural resources.	Time/Paperwork	Too time consuming/Too much paperwork
MI-Access does not help the students who are too high for this test, but too low for MEAP	Higher academics	Does not appropriately assess Mild CI
I have students who breeze through this test but cannot take the MEAP – there needs to be something in between	Too easy	Does not appropriately assess Mild CI
It would be nice if it were bigger	Not clear	Off topic
It is fine	No answer	Off topic
There should be more training	Other	Other
This test would make more sense if it was given at the end of the year	Other	Other

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