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**The Impact of High Stakes Accountability Systems and the New  
Performance Demands on Special Education Teachers' Attitudes, Beliefs  
and Practice**

By

Robin Lee Zane

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California at Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Heinrich Mintrop, Chair

Professor Bruce Fuller

Professor Samuel Lucas

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## ABSTRACT

### **The Impact of High-Stakes Accountability Systems and the New Performance Demands on Special Education Teachers' Attitudes, Beliefs and Practice**

by

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Doctor of Education

University of California, Berkeley

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The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) articulates the goal that all children can learn and are expected to attain grade level academic proficiency by 2014. Based on theories underlying models of extrinsic motivation, the fundamental assumption and theory of action is that a system of rewards and sanctions will motivate teachers to focus on student learning and work harder. While the mandate that students with disabilities participate in large-scale, statewide assessment and reporting systems makes explicit the academic progress of students with disabilities, the primary measurement tools, standardized tests, were not designed with students with disabilities in mind. Consequently, the goals special education teachers are supposed to be striving for may or may not be suitable for their students - a population with presumably very different educational needs than students in general education.

This in-depth study examines how accountability pressures and performance targets mandated for all students impacted a small number of special education teachers. While there is a considerable body of literature investigating the effect of high-stakes assessment and accountability mandates on teachers, generally, special education teachers' plight has been neglected. Although the mechanisms and underlying concepts for understanding teacher responses to accountability may be the same for both general education, and special education, special education teachers are under a more accentuated strain given the wide gap that often separates their students from the demanded norm.

The study found that the special education teachers faced a true dilemma: across the spectrum of teachers contradictory solutions -- some embraced the new demands, some rejected them -- seemed equally untenable. A problem that cannot be solved turns into a dilemma that must be coped with. Each teacher in my study is unique in how he or she copes with the dilemma. The study reveals four salient dimensions: what teachers chose to see when they viewed the achievement gap; how they rationalized (or explained away) their agency or capacity in closing the gap; how they muddled through with instructional tactics to make the gap go away, regardless of

their beliefs; and what they regarded, and guarded, as fields of professional responsibility and autonomous decision making.

## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband. Greg, I would not have been able to do this without your unwavering support. You give so much to me and to our family. Without you, we would not be where we are or who we are today.

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## Chapter I. Introduction

### Statement of the Problem

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 is the brainchild of policy makers, researchers and educators seeking to articulate a new model of educational change. Representing a logical progression in nearly two decades of reform that began with *A Nation at Risk* (Commission on No Child Left Behind, 2007, p.13) NCLB turned what many schools and districts had established as a goal - all children can learn - into national policy (Commission on No Child Left Behind, 2007, p.15). Suddenly all students - even those who had been previously excluded - were required to participate in large-scale assessment systems, and schools were required to include the results in annual state accountability reports. Although the phrase "all children can learn" may sound like an upbeat, almost simplistic, slogan, it is the mantra of a mammoth, highly calculated reform effort to hold districts and schools accountable for student outcomes. NCLB requires states to develop a measure of AYP [Adequate Yearly Progress] for their districts and schools (Commission on No Child Left Behind, 2007, p.14) and to include all children - including previously excluded subgroups - in statewide assessment and reporting systems. NCLB ramped up testing requirements ... and called for reporting test results separated by race, ethnicity and other key demographics of students and required schools to demonstrate adequate yearly progress (AYP) on state tests overall and for each group of students (Commission on No Child Left Behind, 2007, p.14). Consequently, students with disabilities, who fall under the rubric of other key demographics, were not only included in district-wide standardized testing that public schools administered annually, but for the first time, schools could be sanctioned if this subgroup did not meet established annual criteria for progress, as defined by AYP.

Although testing students with disabilities is not new, NCLB's mandate to include students with disabilities in district wide, high stakes assessment systems, and hold schools and school districts accountable for the academic achievement and testing outcomes, is new. What is also new is making explicit the academic achievement of students with disabilities in district-wide reporting systems. Including students with disabilities in state and district assessments has always been done to some extent. Typically, however, only those who could take the test in the same way that everyone else took the test (i.e., under standard administration conditions) were included in the assessments (Thurlow and Johnson, 2000, p. 306). Under NCLB, all children are required to participate in statewide assessment and reporting systems, even those children for whom standard administration is perhaps inappropriate and even, unfair. What is [also] new is the requirement that students with disabilities participate in assessments that in many places were developed for students not receiving special education services (Thurlow and Johnson, 2000, p. 305). The logic behind NCLB and the mandate to include students with disabilities, is that participation in state educational reform efforts is paramount to the establishment of high

expectations (Defur, 2002, p. 204), and higher teacher expectations will lead to increased access to the curriculum, increased participation in the state assessment system, and higher individual student achievement levels. The implication is that these strategies for improving student outcomes will also help students with disabilities to achieve essential skills consistent with those of their peers without disabilities (Defur, 2002, p. 204). The literature on teacher motivation, however, tells a vastly different story. Teachers respond to top down accountability systems in myriad ways, and the issue is very complex. It is, in fact, safe to assume that the lived experiences of special education teachers in response to NCLB is far more complicated than focusing their attention on the standards or developing higher expectations for their students.

The problem this study explores is the dilemma special education teachers find themselves in as a result of the new accountability and assessment systems mandated by NCLB. While top down accountability measures are not new, federal policy under NCLB creates a new paradigm by mandating districts to include children with disabilities in large-scale state standardized assessments - and to make public the test results. The dilemma for special education teachers is whether the new large-scale assessment system forces them to set goals for themselves and their students that may - or may not - be unrealistic and unattainable.

At the heart of the dilemma is the research showing that teachers are intrinsically motivated, want to do a good job, feel effective and make a difference in their students' lives (Finnigan and Gross, 2007; Kelly and Protsik, 1997; Kelly and Protsik, 1999; Steinberg, 2008). If the new high stakes accountability systems stand in direct conflict with the inner values and perceptions special education teachers hold dear by forcing them to set goals they perceive as unfair or unsuitable for their students, then feeling successful and effective as educators, that is, serving students well and making a difference in students' lives, can appear to be an insurmountable task. Only by examining the responses of special education teachers in practice, will I understand the impact of high-stakes accountability systems and the new performance demands on special education teachers' attitudes, beliefs and practice.

## **Purpose of the Study**

Prior to the passage of NCLB, the academic achievement of students in special education was measured almost exclusively by progress on the goals and objectives proscribed in students' Individual Education Plan (IEP). The cornerstone of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 2004 is the Individualized Education Program document known as the IEP; individualization of programming was included in the original IDEA legislation as a means of providing appropriate services for children with disabilities (Gartin and Murdick, 2005, p. 4). The IEP, written to match the profile of each child's learning needs, specifies individualized educational goals, specially designed instruction, and related services needed to attain those goals (McLaughlin and Rhim, 2007, p. 30). Some special education students did participate in statewide testing prior to

NCLB, but many students with disabilities were routinely excluded from large scale assessments (Koretz and Barton, 2004, p. 29). Participation in large-scale assessments was a decision made by the student's IEP team and participation rates were low. Special education teachers considered themselves successful and competent teachers when their students met their IEP goals, but there was a great deal of subjectivity and forgiveness in the measurement of outcomes, and norms of privacy meant reporting of student progress was limited, with achievement information considered the business of the IEP team (Defur, 2002). The individualized performance measures also meant that student progress was not only ambiguous but that the rewards for teachers were diffuse. However, all this was considered part and parcel of the occupational culture of special education because, after all, special education teachers are in the business of helping kids (McCormack, Pearson and Paratore, 2007, p. 304).

The passage of NCLB has changed all that. In the era of high-stakes accountability systems, all but the most severely disabled students are expected to participate in large-scale, standardized assessments, demonstrate measurable progress, and eventually reach grade level norms. A participation rate of at least 95 % of students with disabilities is mandated in statewide assessments and, the measure and accountability for student progress is no longer contained within an IEP but is part of the larger requirements of NCLB (Vannest, Mahadevan, Mason and Temple-Harvey, 2008, p. 149). The era of subjective, individualized achievement goals has been replaced by new performance measures that are clear and quantitative, and special education teachers are not only held directly responsible for the academic outcomes, but test results are disaggregated by subgroup and made public through statewide reporting systems. The pressure aspect of NCLB further complicates matters, because the assessment results of the subgroup children with disabilities can affect the entire school.

The accountability policies under girding NCLB represent a sea change for teachers in special education because they stand in sharp contrast to earlier accountability systems, which allowed them to set norms and student achievement goals based on each individual child's perceived learning needs. Accountability has many implications for special education. Heightened accountability involves the assessment and reporting of progress through more standardized measures and affects special educators in the development of appropriate assessments, inclusion of students performing significantly below grade level, and determination of individualized instructional goals. By default, measuring student annual progress through an Individual Education Program (IEP) is no longer sufficient to account for progress because progress is measured by a standardized assessment (Vannest, et. al., 2008, p. 149). Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under NCLB mandates that the academic achievement of students in special education be measured in the same manner as that of their non-disabled peers. Hence, for the first time, students with disabilities are held to the same high standards as their non-disabled peers.

Some educators see this policy as a break-through of unprecedented proportions. Requirements to include students with disabilities in state and

district assessments and to report on their performance recognize that students with disabilities benefit from being held to high standards, from having access to the general education curriculum, and from being part of the student body for which educators are held accountable for teaching+(McDonnell et al., 1997; U.S. Department of Education, 1999; in, Thurlow and Johnson, 2000, p. 306). Others, who fear that the high standards are inappropriate and the consequences unfair, question such blunt, non-differentiated educational policies. %Some educational experts insist that high expectations and standards conserve as the great equalizer of educational opportunities for the diversity of students served in public education; others maintain that such whole sale and narrowly defined education outcomes do the most disservice to those student populations who have traditionally been disenfranchised+(Monroe, 2002; Kohn, 2001; in, Defur, 2002, p. 204).

The purpose of this research study is to explore the dilemma the new, high-stakes accountability and assessment policies create for teachers in the field of special. While there is a small but growing body of literature on the intended and unintended consequences of NCLB's high-stakes assessment and accountability measures on children with disabilities, i.e., *students* in special education, there is very little research on the effects of these top down, high-stakes, new performance mandates on their *teachers*. Thus, by examining data gathered over time from special education teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities on the secondary school level, I hope to close the gap in the literature by examining how teachers in special education are responding to the top down accountability systems and the high-stakes performances mandates that hold them responsible for closing the achievement gap between children with disabilities and their non-disabled peers.

The main emphasis of this in-depth, multi-case study focuses on gathering data from special education teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities on the secondary school level. By collecting and analyzing data from teacher interviews and classroom observations, this study seeks to explore the impact of high stakes testing and the new performance demands on the beliefs, attitudes and practice of teachers in special education.

As an veteran special education administrator and researcher, I am interested in how this study might serve to understand the complexity of implementing external motivational policies, such as articulated by NCLB, on special education teachers, whose job it is to raise the achievement level of students with disabilities. From my unique stand point, I will be able to examine over time how high-stakes accountability measures and the new performance demands are impacting teachers' attitudes, beliefs and practice. This is important because the mandates of the new performance demands are a huge shift away from our traditional ways of thinking about teaching and learning in special education. Hence, I have undertaken this study to address these inquiries to inform future policy and practice in the field of special education.

## Chapter II. Review of the Literature

### Introduction

In an early, *pre-NCLB*, longitudinal study looking at the impact of accountability on students with disabilities in inclusive classroom settings, Margaret McLaughlin found that the new performance standards created a sense of frustration and urgency among teachers. Accountability for results was the focus of the schools, and teachers knew that students with all but the most significant disabilities were expected to be part of the accountability equation. This shift generally created a sense of urgency and various degrees of frustration among teachers about how to accomplish this difficult task (McLaughlin, 2000, p. 25). This research study is *post-NCLB*, and explores the same phenomenon almost ten years later, when state accountability systems are reinforced by federal high stakes accountability and reporting systems that include the pressure of rewards and sanctions.

This Literature Review is concerned with setting the groundwork for a study that examines the dilemma accountability and assessment policies create for teachers in the field of special education. Although there is a growing body of respectable literature that examines the impact of top down accountability measures on schools, teachers and administrators in general education, very few empirical studies look at the effect of large-scale accountability systems on teachers in special education. This literature review will establish the foundation for the study by first a) examining the literature on the history and purpose of high-stakes accountability policies; b) looking at theories of teacher motivation, and the impact, the intended and unintended consequences, of high stakes assessments on teachers in general education, and; c) concluding with research on the occupational culture of special education.

The literature on teacher motivation informs the central research questions of this study examining how accountability pressures and performance targets mandated for all students have impacted special education teachers. Since the assessments are designed for children in general education, teachers in special education programs might perceive the assessments as irrelevant and invalid and the goals as unfair, or on the contrary, find the tests to be a helpful measure of progress and the goals realistic and fair. In fact, the jury is still out and hard evidence is sparse. Although recent research has begun to explore the effects of high-stakes accountability systems and the new performance measures on students with disabilities, very little research addresses how their teachers are interacting with these external system demands, how they are responding to the accountability pressure and guidance systems of NCLB, and what impact it has on their attitudes, beliefs and classroom practice. For this study, an extensive review of the literature included professional peer reviewed journals, books, and published works on teacher motivation, the history and theory of action undergirding high-stakes accountability systems, the impact of external accountability systems on teacher motivation, and the occupational culture of special education.



## Special Education Students and High Stakes Accountability Systems

Accountability is defined as "the quality or state of being accountable; especially: an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility and account for one's actions" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, in Herman, 2007), and in the current high-stakes testing era of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, accountability in public education is primarily measured by large-scale, high-stakes state standardized assessments. Tests are considered high stakes for students when the results are used to make critical decisions about students' placement or future (Thurlow and Johnson, 2000). Tests become high stakes for teachers, schools and districts when the results are attached to a system of rewards and sanctions as defined by a state's accountability system. These high stakes accountability and assessment systems present a practical dilemma for teachers of students with disabilities because the tests are designed for students in general education and consequently, are inappropriate for students with disabilities. In other words, although they do not fit the needs of the teachers or the needs of their students, they carry high stakes . serious consequences . for both the students and their teachers.

According to Koretz and Barton (2004, p. 31), "The main question is how students with disabilities should best be assessed in the context of general education assessment." With the passage of NCLB, this "main" question is really just the beginning. Current federal educational policy requires states to create a system of sanctions and incentives that punish or reward schools and school districts based on the results of several criteria. Paramount among these criteria are the results of large- scale standardized assessment systems which, along with several other federal or state regulated indicators such as high school graduation rates, attendance rates and school safety factors, form a profile of efficacy for schools and districts. In spite of the fact that the standardized tests states use in the large-scale accountability systems are normed for students in general education, NCLB mandates that children with disabilities be tested . and the results reported - along with those of their non-disabled peers (Thurlow and Johnson, 2000). While this may create new goal horizons for teachers and important learning opportunities for students, several research studies have stated the need for additional information (Koretz, 2001; Nelson, 2004).

That schools may fall short of their annual goals because of their disabled student sub group serves to obfuscate an already convoluted picture, and despite what appears to be glaring incongruities in the law, school districts, schools, special education administrators and teachers must comply. Although "one of the main purposes of NCLB was to increase accountability related to student achievement" (Jones, 2007, p. 66), the primary measurement tools . standardized tests . were not designed with students with disabilities in mind. Mintrop and Trujillo (2007), in their study of the effects of high stakes accountability systems on California public schools, label this a paradoxical situation. "Whether the system based performance categories stand for some broader based characteristics of school quality, or they are not connected to tangible educational and organizational conditions from which teachers can learn" (Mintrop and Trujillo, 2007, p. 320). In other words, the inappropriateness

of the accountability system for measuring the academic progress of students with disabilities is a situation that can easily be labeled paradoxical.

In their 2006 study for The Educational Policy Reform Institute (EPRI) explores the impact of mandating districts to include students with disabilities in their AYP. The results of their five year, mixed methods study investigating the perceptions of district personnel in four states and eight school districts reveals a complex, albeit predictable picture. Data was both positive and negative. Participants' responses ranged from the belief that the performance of students with disabilities had improved as a result of accountability reforms and that as these students have greater opportunity to learn the curriculum their performance will continue, to concern that some students would not be able to meet the standards despite the efforts of schools and teachers. The implication for schools is that they risk identification as failing schools based on the poor performance of students with disabilities (Nagle, Yunker and Malmgren, 2006, p. 37).

Despite myriad problems and a cacophony of debate from constituents, high-stakes accountability systems and the new performance measures have transformed the way stakeholders - practitioners and parents, teachers and administrators - think about teaching and learning, assessment, student achievement, and perhaps even more profoundly, the purpose of public education schooling. The inclusion of children with disabilities in large-scale assessment and accountability systems has changed the face of special education - forever.

### **In Pursuit of Equity - Guidance and Pressure**

With perhaps the best of intentions, the passage of NCLB ushered in a new, *no excuses* era, where blaming the victim was no longer politically acceptable. Eponymous with the title and promise of the law is the provision that all children can learn and that no child should be left behind. To this end, the policy requires that assessment results and State progress objectives must be broken out by poverty, race, ethnicity, disability and limited English proficiency to insure that no group is left behind (U.S. Department of Education, *Increased Accountability*, in Jones, 2007, p. 75). It also requires that, when reliability permits, performance be reported separately for these groups, including students with disabilities, and that schools be held accountable if they do not meet separate measurable annual objectives for continuous and substantial improvement for each of the groups (Koretz and Barton, 2004, p. 30).

By laying the responsibility for student outcomes on the doorstep of local districts, NCLB shifted the primary unit of accountability to school and teachers, with the intention of increasing the focus on student learning (Hamilton, Stecher, Russell, Marsh and Miles, 2008). The working hypothesis, according to Fuller, (Fuller, 2008, p. 26) was to align what was actually happening in the classroom with the new state standards. As state curriculum panels listed pieces of knowledge that all second graders should know in language arts, or eighth graders should understand when it comes to math, teachers presumably would become more proficient in transmitting mandated bits of knowledge (Fuller,

2008, p. 26). However, grabbing and holding the attention of educators is only part of the story; equally important is NCLB's mandate provision to hold schools teachers, administrators (and even students) responsible for educational outcomes. NCLB is based on a theoretical assumption that consequences will motivate school staff to perform at higher levels and focus their attention on student outcomes (Finnigan and Gross, 2007, p. 594).

Although many states had educational accountability policies in place by the time the Bush administration implemented the current federal educational policy, the landmark NCLB codified a developing policy view that standards, testing and accountability were the path to improved performance (Hanushek and Raymond, 2005, p. 297). NCLB requires that 95% of each of four identified sub groups [e.g., African Americans, English Language Learners, low income students and students with disabilities] be tested by the state accountability systems used for reporting (Koretz and Baron, 2004, p. 30). NCLB also introduced a highly controversial paradigm shift that emphasized performance objectives and outcomes rather than school inputs (Carnoy and Loeb, 2002). It did not mean, however, that schools should not have quality teachers, enough books, adequate space or enough dollars. Rather, it means that all of these inputs, although important, are there in the service of improving student achievement (Hess, 1999 b, p. 500).

The current wave of assessment. based accountability reforms combines two traditions in American education - public accountability and student testing (Carnoy and Loeb, 2002, p. 305). Although the expressed purpose of the new accountability measures is to raise student achievement and more generally, to improve American schooling (Carney and Loeb, 2002, p. 308), for practitioners in the field, NCLB's assessment and accountability mandates have . for better or for worse - upended many long standing beliefs. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the field of special education. Until recently, special education students were either not included in large-scale assessment and reporting systems or not tested at all. With the advent of NCLB, teachers of special education students have no choice but to follow federal and state mandates and administer statewide assessments to all students, bringing to the forefront a combination of long standing, deep, equity issues and a morass of policy and practice concerns.

This most recent wave of top down accountability measures has polarized educators. Recent discourse on state accountability systems appears, unfortunately, to have developed into a strict dichotomy in which accountability is either all good or all bad (Scheurich, Skrla and Johnson, 2000, p. 293). Advocates of test-based accountability argue that it improves student achievement by helping teachers focus on important content, providing incentives for good teaching, and producing information that can be used to make decisions about students, teachers and schools (Koretz and Hamilton, 2003, p. 1). Critics find that the impact of high stakes testing shows effects contrary to the intentions and expectations of reformers (Noble and Smith, 1994, p. 113), such as increasing retention and dropout rates, or forcing teachers to teach to the test, thereby narrowing the curriculum.

The truth may lie somewhere in between, not in black or white, but rather in shades of gray. Koretz and Hamilton (2003, p. 2) claim that high stakes testing does influence teachers and classroom instruction, but these effects are complex and comprise both desirable and undesirable changes in practice. Noble and Smith state that high stakes, mandated testing shapes the curriculum, but not necessarily in straightforward ways; and, also has been shown to influence pedagogy. (Noble and Smith, 1994, p. 114). Fuller bridges this ostensible dichotomy with attempts to paint a more detailed picture. Beyond describing how top down accountability has taken shape in the states and from Washington, lines of empirical work are painting a more detailed picture of whether this policy is yielding positive effects and the causal mechanisms that are breaking down, from uneven school capacity and will to focus on students left behind to insufficient resources, including time, smaller classes, instructional materials, and pedagogical innovations, so necessary to strengthening student engagement. (Fuller, 2008, p. 21).

The fundamental premise behind NCLB is that schools . given proper pressure and guidance from the state and federal government in the form of accountability policies - can alter their performance. Based on three main components, standards, assessment and stakes, The Theory of Action behind NCLB is that, through clear expectations of educational goals, measurement of student progress, and consequences for not meeting these goals, NCLB hopes to motivate schools to improve instruction in core content areas. (Cawthon, 2007, p. 462). Standards refer to the guidance aspect of NCLB, defining what schools are asked to teach their students. (Cawthon, 2007, p. 462), and the content knowledge and skills that form the basis for evaluating proficiency. In addition to the guidance policies, NCLB and state accountability policies mandate large-scale statewide assessments that will enable the state to monitor progress. Standardized assessments are intended to measure the effectiveness of a school's performance, (Cawthon, 2007, p. 462 ). A state's system of sanctions and rewards or incentives is based on assessment results and, along with other specifically defined indicators such as attendance and graduation rates, can be considered the pressure aspect of NCLB. The aim is significant and sustainable improvement in student outcomes for all students, but the pressure behind accountability measures affect staff and students alike; in essence, the system [of rewards and sanctions] addresses the will and capacities of employees to undertake change and the will of students to be fully engaged with their schoolwork. (Hess, 1999 b, p. 513).

Although will and capacity are powerful tools, several studies find that capacity building and raising student achievement levels are complex processes that cannot be accomplished by pressure and sanctions alone. Recent research reveals a panoply of factors is involved with whole school change and growth. Some of the more agreed upon factors that influence school improvement include: teacher learning and teacher motivation; clear, focused reforms; a strong faculty culture; a school's internal coherence; and, how effectively a school engages with external accountability systems (Noble and Smith 1994; Finnigan

and Gross, 2007; Kelly and Protsick 1999; Elmore, 2004; Mintrop and Trujillo 2007).

Hess, in his research of Chicago School Reform, examines both the guidance and sanctions aspects of school improvement efforts. For schools to improve, their teachers must have high expectations for their students, their staff must have the opportunity and resources to adopt school reform strategies that will make significant change, and the capacities of teachers must be expanded, both in knowledge of their subject matter and in the ability to lead students to higher levels of learning (Hess, 1999 b, p. 514). He concludes, however, that for accountability measures to be successful, the pressure aspect is required. The evidence from Chicago is that these conditions alone will lead a number, but not all, schools to make significant improvements. To broaden the effects to all schools, accountability is likely to be an essential component as well, whereby teachers, principals and students all must bear consequences for their actions. Accountability is an important component to add to high expectations, expanded opportunity and enhanced capacity (Hess, 1999 b, p. 514).

Additional studies question the value of high stakes, top down accountability measures and raise serious concerns regarding the consistency and longevity of gains on statewide assessments (Carney, Loeb and Smith, 2001; Greene, Winters and Forster, 2004), especially when compared with the NAEP or venerable, high-stakes tests such as the SAT and ACT. Another concern is that increases in state assessment scores following the implementation of high-stakes assessment policies do not always generalize to assessments that measure similar academic skills (Christensen, Decker, Treizenberg, Ysseldyke and Reschly, 2007, p. 665). Koretz and Hamilton also raise doubts about the validity of gains by pinpointing the complexity of this issue in a 2003 study that describes the variety of ways teachers responded to the MCAS in attempt to improve test scores.

A landmark study by Booher-Jennings (2005) supports this contention. Investigating the effect of statewide assessment and accountability systems on public school teachers in Texas, the author looks at teachers' responses to increased pressure to raise students' test scores in two public school districts. She finds the pressures of high stakes tests can cause teachers to alter their practices and respond by gaming and finding loopholes in the accountability system (Booher-Jennings, 2005, p. 233). Collecting data through observations, document reviews and interviews with school personnel, the author discovers teachers committing a form of [district approved] educational triage by focusing their attention and resources on kids most likely to improve the school's scores (Booher-Jennings, 2005, 233). She calls these students the bubble kids (Booher-Jennings, 2005, p. 233). Yet, when she asks why teachers would respond to accountability systems in such an extreme manner, Booher-Jennings uncovers a mass of contradictions, finding that she cannot describe the problem as one of low teacher expectations or lack of commitment. On the contrary, the teachers expressed a strong commitment to children, particularly poor minority children (Booher-Jennings, 2005, p. 251). Consequently, the author turns to theories of teacher-teacher relationships and relational trust as a way to explain

why teachers did what they did. She concludes that the accountability system in Texas reinforced the notion that the sole measure of good teaching is the attainment of a high pass rate. Consequently, teachers sought to be recognized as good teachers by using an institutional logic. Or, concretely, a series of educational triage practices to increase students' scores (Booher-Jennings, 2005, p. 259).

Finally, Hanushek and Raymond found evidence that the impact of accountability may vary by subgroup, and that accountability policies alone cannot close the achievement gap. While the introduction of a consequential accountability system has a clearly beneficial impact on overall performance, other forces are simultaneously pushing the distribution of performance, particularly as observed in the Black-White achievement gap, in less desirable ways (Hanushek and Raymond, 2005, p. 321). Thus, accountability policies could conceivably improve student outcomes, but not help close the achievement gap. Again, as is frequently the case, a single policy cannot effectively work for two different objectives- raising overall student achievement and providing more equitable outcomes (Hanushek and Raymond, 2005, p. 322). This last point raises an interesting question quite germane to this literature review: Can NCLB's all-inclusive yet singularly focused accountability policies close the achievement gap for students with disabilities? Federal policy under NCLB holds special education teachers to higher standards than in the past with the mandates to include children with disabilities and to make public the test results. The dilemma for special education teachers is whether the new large-scale assessment system forces them to set goals for themselves and their students that may - or may not - be unrealistic and unattainable. The research on teacher motivation helps to deepen the understanding of how top down, high-stakes accountability and assessment systems may impact schools and teachers in general education and how, for teachers in special education, the new high-stakes accountability systems may give rise to serious problems of practice.

## Theories of Teacher Motivation

The research questions for this proposed study are concerned with exploring how special education teachers are responding to the changes and challenges posed by the relatively new, high-stakes assessment and accountability systems, and how they are orienting themselves to the drastically different conditions created by these new performance measures. As stated in the introduction to this paper, while there is a small but growing body of literature on the intended and unintended consequences of NCLB's high-stakes assessment and accountability measures on children with disabilities, i.e., *students* in special education, there is very little research on the effects of these top down, high-stakes, new performance mandates on their *teachers*. I draw from theories of teacher motivation to provide a set of theoretical tools for bridging the gap in the literature on how special education teachers might reconcile and respond to the dilemma presented by the new state and federal high-stakes accountability systems.

To begin with, a working definition of terms is needed. Miskel, in an early study reviewing models of work motivation, provides a useful, commonly accepted definition of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and describes intrinsic rewards as outcomes mediated within the individual and that the individual grants himself or herself and, extrinsic rewards are those provided by the organization or other people (Miskel, 1982, p. 68). He then links this definition to education by stating that for teachers intrinsic outcomes may be feelings of accomplishment or achievement and, extrinsic outcomes may include a variety of rewards such as recognition, money, promotion etc. (Miskel, 1982, p. 68). Studies on theories of teacher motivation suggest that teachers are primarily intrinsically motivated to make a difference in their students' lives, see their students improve and do a good job. The most often cited goals motivating teachers are typically viewed as intrinsic in nature; helping students learn and seeing them meet achievement goals (Goodlad 1984; Lortie, 1975; in Leithwood, Steinbach and Jantzi, 2002, p. 99). Steinberg, in a study exploring the emotional reactions of teachers to high-stakes assessment, calls this the pleasure and pride of observing students' progress in understanding (Steinberg, 2008, p. 45). The literature on teacher motivation also emphasizes the intuitive notion that teachers care a great deal about their students' successes and failures. In other words, there is, an ethic of caring (Wellman, 2007) among teachers, and when they see their students do well, the motivating feelings of being good at what they do . being successful, and competent teachers - follow.

The new high-stakes accountability policies reflect policy makers' assumptions that intrinsic motivation has not provided the push teachers need to improve student outcomes, and that teachers are resistant to change (Hamilton, et. al., 2008). While the blanket statement that teachers are resistant to change paints a rather bleak picture of educators and their values, it does beg the question of what motivates teachers to grow and change. Two theories of extrinsic motivation are of particular interest to this proposed study: Expectancy Theory and Goal Setting Theory. The first theory of interest, Expectancy Theory, proposes that incentive systems can motivate individuals to change if they believe the goals are realistic, attainable, connected to outcomes they value and within their line of sight (Kelley and Protsik, 1997, p. 482; Finnigan and Gross, 2007; Mohrman and Lawler, 1996). Simply put, the basic premise of Expectancy Theory is that, an individual believes [expects] that his/her effort will lead to achievement of the specific goal and the goal is something that is valued (Kelley and Finnigan, 2003, p. 604). In education, expectancy theory interacts with other important constructs affecting teacher motivation, such as teachers' perceptions of their own efficacy and several, key contextual conditions, such as organizational support (administrative and peer support) as well as teachers' perceptions of organizational capacity.

The second theory, Goal Setting Theory, states that people can be motivated if organizations set goals that are clear, meaningful and doable (Kelley and Protsik, 1997). Goal Setting Theory, states that goals motivate employees when they are specific, challenging, accepted as worthwhile and achievable (Kelley and Protsik, 1997, p. 482). In addition, goal setting theory states that the

more challenging and specific the goals, the stronger the effort an individual will make to reach the goals (Miskel, 1982). Goal theory is fairly straightforward. Goal theory assumes that all human behavior is purposive: behavior is regulated by goals and intentions. A goal, therefore, is what an individual is consciously trying to achieve (Miskel, 1982, p. 77). Goal Setting Theory also emphasizes values; goals must not only appear clear and understandable, but also worthwhile (meaningful) and attainable (doable). In fact, studies on the motivational processes influencing teacher behavior in School Based Performance Award programs in Kentucky and North Carolina, found that establishing clear, challenging goals can influence teachers' willingness to coalesce around a well-defined sense of purpose, thereby increasing their sense of efficacy and perceptions of improved organizational capacity, leading to improved student outcomes (Kelley and Finnigan, 2003).

The new performance measures present special education teachers, for perhaps the first time, with clear and quantitative performance measures. Based on the concepts underlying these models of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, teachers in both general and special education might respond positively to the new state and federal accountability mandates if certain conditions are met. These conditions include believing students can meet the new goals (considering the goals realistic), perceptions of resources, such as instructional materials, school leadership and peer support as sufficient (organizational support), and having the expectancy that their efforts will that accomplish the goal (Finnigan and Gross, 2007). In addition, if teachers possess a strong sense of self-efficacy, i.e., the conviction that their behaviors could positively and sufficiently influence student performance (Kelley and Protsik, 1997, p. 400), and perceive the accountability goals as fair and meaningful, they may also respond productively to external accountability policies (Kelly and Protsik, 1997; Kelley and Finnigan, 2003; Mintrop, 2004). In fact, Kelly and Finnigan found that, Program fairness stood out as the strongest teacher attitude predictor of individual teacher expectancy (Kelley and Finnigan, 2003, p. 618). Last, the line of sight between the goal and the incentive must exist (Kelley and Protsik, 1997, p. 482). With the advent of NCLB and high stakes assessment and accountability systems, incentives are often the desire to *avoid sanctions* and maintain good professional status. Studies on schools in Kentucky and Maryland have shown that the meaningfulness of the accountability system, and the importance of avoiding sanctions (maintaining good professional status) were very powerful motivational factors influencing teachers' responses to high-stakes accountability measures (Mintrop, 2004; Kelley and Protsik, 1997).

Finally, Shamir offers additional insights into the mix of theories of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Putting forth the proposition of a self-concept based theory of work motivation (Shamir, 2005, p. 406), Shamir suggests that current theories of intrinsic, and particularly extrinsic motivation, are limited because they presuppose the situational-bias of strong situations, where clear goals are linked closely to rewards. Situations characterized by clear goals, availability of rewards and strong rewards-performance relationship are high in situational strength (Shamir, 1991, p. 407). Schools where teachers work, however, are



frequently described as highly complex, the goals as uncertain or diffuse, and the link between effort and rewards as obscure. Schools, then, may accurately be described as low in situational strength. Cohen, in his seminal article, "Rewarding Teachers for Student Performance," provides a compelling explanation of why, in education, this is so. "Teachers like other practitioners of human improvement, cannot produce results by themselves." Teachers are not the chief agent of student learning. Students are that agent, and teachers, however important, are ancillary (Cohen, 1996, p. 89).

Stating that humans are driven by the need for self-expression consonant with one's values and identity, Shamir says that, "Humans are not only goal oriented but also self-expressive. This means that behavior is not always goal-oriented, instrumental and calculated but is also expressive of feelings, attitudes and self-concepts" (Shamir, 2005, p. 411). In other words, if teachers' work in schools can be characterized as low in situational strength, then teachers may have to be resilient and rely on their sense of a higher calling (or desire to make a difference) to remain motivated and engaged. Thus, while accountability systems try to force the issue, namely by making schools stronger work situations, they may fail to do so, revealing a potentially serious design flaw in policy makers' thinking.

This line of reasoning also diminishes the strength of extrinsic motivational theories, such as Expectancy and Goal Theories, in describing the dynamics that, in reality, may be played out under the new state and federal accountability policies. The distinguishing characteristics of special education: individual norms, measuring the progress of students with disabilities according to each child's unique capacities, the often yawning gap between individual performance measures and normative expectations, and diffuse, ambiguous rewards, all imply that teachers in special education, perhaps even more so than their peers in regular education, may be motivated solely by intrinsic factors. If this is the case, it renders the assumption that teachers in special education can be motivated by extrinsic factors such as those undergirding NCLB, moot, and relegates the effectiveness of the new accountability systems to the realm of remote possibilities.

## **The Occupational Culture of Special Education**

In order to become a teacher in special education, a candidate must enroll in a graduate level teacher-training program that specializes in teaching children with disabilities. Most state sanctioned teacher credentialing programs require two full years of graduate studies that include a long period of student teaching apprenticeship. The common structure and extensive training period of teacher credentialing programs lay the groundwork for the creation of the specialized, occupational culture of special education. According to Artiles, an occupation can be characterized as having a culture if an intense period of education and apprenticeship occur, leading to a shared learning of attitudes and norms that will eventually become taken for granted assumptions for the members of those occupations (Schein, 2004, p. 20). For teaching candidates in special education,

the intense period of learning and internship leads to the development of attitudes, beliefs and values particular to the profession. The beliefs, and what Schein calls the *espoused values* of special education, reflect a respect for the differences of children with disabilities, as well as the previously mentioned norms of privacy and individuality. After a while, these taken beliefs become taken-for-granted assumptions (Schein, 2004), or in Artiles's words, *a way of life* (Artiles, 2003, p.180).

Until as late as 1975, public schools were not required to educate or include students with disabilities in their programs or services (Sullivan, 2010). Part and parcel of the larger, historical effort to create educational equity, the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was created to *enhance access and participation for students considered *different* [italics theirs]* (Artiles and Bal, 2008, p. 5). The development of this parallel system of special . and separate - education for children with disabilities has not, however, automatically translated into equal opportunities. Pointing to such questionable practices as *vague disability criteria, ongoing segregation from general education, adoption of ineffective interventions and poor student outcomes* (Sullivan, 2010, p. 4), Sullivan identifies some of the major concerns *plaguing the field today*. Artiles addresses these concerns with the exhortation that researchers and practitioners should try to move beyond traditional teaching and assessment practices in special education and begin to examine their own cultural biases and deep-seated beliefs, in order to make *explicit the underlying assumptions of difference* and *acknowledge the role of power in the creation of borders* (Artiles, 2003, p. 193). Most germane to this paper, however, is the taken-for-granted assumption among special educators that the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers is, *a way of life*. *As controversial tracking practices and structured English immersion programs highlight, a unified educational system has never been realized; multiple institutional structures exist to separate students considered different; special education is just one of them* (Sullivan, 2010, p. 96).

## Conceptual Framework

I focus on the literature on teacher motivation to formulate my research questions and construct the conceptual framework for this study. The research on teacher motivation informs and helps to deepen the understanding of the effect of top down, high-stakes accountability and assessment systems on teachers in special education. *The new [accountability] systems reflect an explicit theory of action that stresses the motivation of teachers, students and administrators* (Fuhrman, 2003, p. 2). The underlying guiding proposition and conceptual framework for this study is that teachers, administrators and students must be motivated to change. Grounded in social and cognitive theories of organizational psychology that posit holding schools, teachers and students accountable for academic performance, the theory of action behind NCLB assumes that *with incentives provided [accountability policies] will inform,*

motivate and reorient the behavior of schooling agents towards the goal+(Lee and Wong, 2004, p. 800).

There is a considerable body of literature investigating the effect the new high-stakes assessment and accountability mandates have had on teachers, but it is almost exclusively concerned with teachers in general education. Research on the beliefs of education professionals related to the inclusion of students with disabilities in statewide testing has not been nearly as prolific as related to general education+(Crawford and Tindhal, 2006, p. 210). The one thing we do know is that the new high-stakes accountability measures have affected children with disabilities and their teachers in radical and dramatic ways (Cole, 2006; McLaughlin and Rhim, 2007; Nagle and Yunker, 2006; Nelson, 2006; Ratcliffe and Willard, 2006; Vannest, et.al., 2008). Although the mechanisms and underlying concepts for understanding teachers' reactions to state and federal accountability systems may be the same for both general and special education, special education teachers are asked to implement the new performance mandates on a population with very different educational needs+(Vannest, et. al., 2008, p.149). Consequently, the concrete manifestations of the effects of the new state and federal accountability systems on special education teachers may be strikingly different than on teachers in general education.

In order to explore the impact of high-stakes accountability systems and the new performance measures on teachers in special education, it is critical to examine the interaction of intrinsic motivational factors with the external incentives+undergirding NCLB (Finnigan and Gross, 2007, p. 597). The problems of practice for special education teachers begin at the junction of the old and new, where norms of individuality collide with the new performance measures mandating the inclusion of children with disabilities in statewide assessment and reporting systems and their achievement at grade level norms. When teachers' inner values stand in conflict with the very incentives intended to motivate them, a dilemma of serious proportions arises.

While some teachers may embrace the new performance measures, others may want to continue to do what they have always done. The lever for change, the pressure of sanctions, may be characterized best as a two edged sword, because it creates both good pressure and bad pressure. Simply put, good pressure can result in raising teachers' expectations and helping them embrace the new performance measures; bad pressure can demoralize and overwhelm teachers. The image of a pressure cooker comes to mind, because these new mandates create a challenge that can overwhelm and demoralize even the most highly skilled and experienced teachers. Thus, when long-standing values and intrinsic motivational factors (such as doing what is right for students and following a higher calling) end up in direct opposition to the new accountability mandates, and refusal to change carries a host of unpleasant consequences, special education teachers find themselves sitting atop the horns of a difficult dilemma.

It is possible to conjecture that they will try to resolve the dilemma they face . if in fact a resolution is possible - several different ways. For example, if special education teachers value the new performance measures (holding their

students to the same standards as their non-disabled peers and of closing the achievement gap) as meaningful, they might become energized, roll up their sleeves and do their absolute best to meet these new challenges. On the other hand, if the threat of sanctions is perceived as real, special education teachers might respond in a similar manner and work to raise student achievement levels but without the same sense of enthusiasm and conviction that they would if goals are perceived as meaningful and doable. A third possible scenario is that special education teachers do not perceive the new accountability measures as problematic, nor do they do not see a dilemma. For these teachers, there may be no confusion, conflict or ambivalence because the goals articulated by the new performance measures have been internalized, and as such are aligned . or not aligned - with their values, goals and sense of capacity. For these teachers, the path to take in response to the new performance measures is crystal clear. Finally, given the existing technical culture of special education - with its incremental, carefully articulated, individualized monitoring system - special education teachers may find the new high-stakes accountability system just another form of accountability. These teachers may have a sense of accountability ingrained in their ways of doing things, their thinking about student achievement and perceiving student progress.

Based on the above theories of teacher motivation discussed above, I expect special education teachers find themselves faced with difficult problems of practice they must try to resolve. Although the new performance measures present special education teachers with new goals that are, for the first time, clear and quantitative, they are also inflexible and unforgiving. Whether this challenge stands in welcome contrast to the diffuse and ambiguous intrinsic rewards they were accustomed to, is one of the questions this proposed study intends to explore. Steinberg captures the problems of practice special education teachers face nicely when she states that, "Accountability processes emphasize the external goods of the practice over and above the internal goods . a good teacher is one whose students achieve high marks on externally set, standardized tests, not someone who enables each child to progress" (Steinberg, 2008, p. 55). Although she is referring to the problems general education teachers face, she is also describing the tension that accountability systems create for special education teachers, because the new performance goals force teachers to pit traditional, intuitive beliefs about the why and how of teaching against the what of external policies.

To capture the problems practices the new accountability systems create for special education teachers, I borrow again from Artiles, who claims that, surprisingly, this is not a new dilemma. "Special education has historically faced the dilemma of affirming or ignoring difference" (Artiles, 2003, p.193). Under the new performance mandates, special education teachers who believe that normal is a subjective term, consider an individualized educational system just, appropriate and fair, and deeply care for children with disabilities, must now push their students to meet grade level norms and compare their progress with that of their non-disabled peers. On the one hand, accepting the new performance goals, pushing students with disabilities towards grade level norms, changing

expectations (in accountability parlance, raising expectations) and accepting the state's accountability demands as "good goals", may mean appropriately preparing children with disabilities for life in a competitive world and continuing to work "for the good of the children". On the other hand, accepting the new accountability measures can imply a lack of concern and respect for children with differences, and appear uncaring.

The new performance mandates then, could create a dilemma for special education teachers: Should they choose to ignore, or continue to affirm, the traditional, prevalent values of special education? While theories of extrinsic motivation claim that if students respond to teachers' increased efforts by meeting their performance goals, teachers will respond in kind with renewed effort and higher expectations (leading to improved student outcomes), the reality is multidimensional and complex. Special education teachers might just as easily agonize over the conflict between state demands and what they consider "good for the children" or worse, view the new goals as impossible and meaningless, but still have to respond. The multiple possible scenarios that can come about as special education teachers grapple with and respond to the new performance demands are also influenced by the high-stakes system of incentives (the pressure of sanctions), as well as by perceptions of capacity (self-efficacy and school contextual conditions).

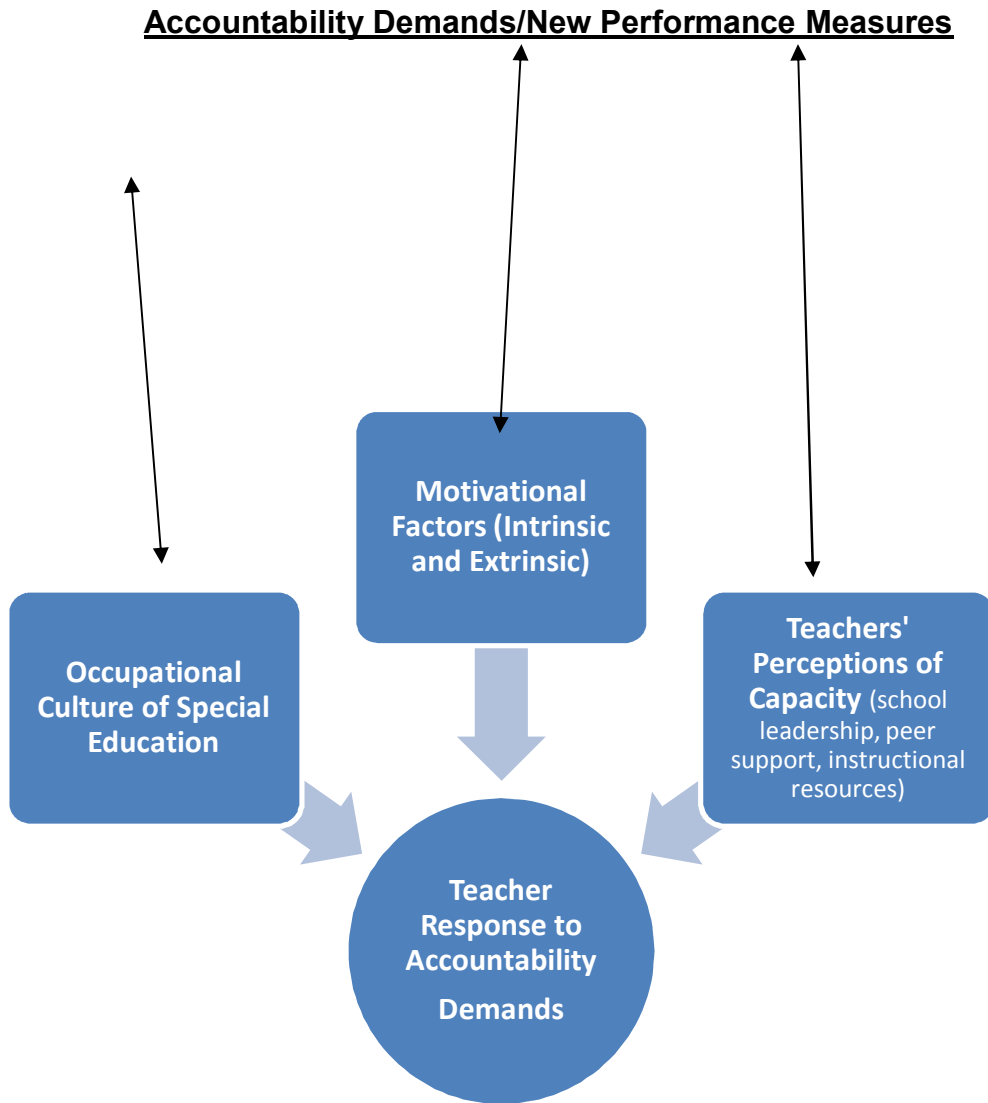
Finally, Shamir's theories of self-concept imply that special educators . who may rely solely on intrinsic motivational factors as "a way of life" - may actually be impervious to the influence of extrinsic motivation, but still have to respond to the new performance demands and the pressure of sanctions. Hence, the purpose of this study is to explore in-depth the range of these possible responses, and as a result, develop an understanding of how teachers in special education are responding to the new high-takes assessment and accountability systems, and what effects the new performance measures have on their beliefs, attitudes and classroom practice.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework - Ideal Typical Teacher Responses**

	Without Accountability	With Accountability	With Accountability	With Accountability
	<b>Intrinsic Motivation</b>	<b>Intrinsic Motivation</b>	<b>Extrinsic Motivation</b>	<b>Interaction of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation</b>
<b>Goals/Rewards</b>	Rewards are unimportant. I am only doing my duty and answering a higher calling	Rewards are unimportant. I am in agreement with accountability demands. They are important for preparing students for life opportunities. (positive)	The new accountability demands are important.	The new accountability demands may be important but I don't agree with them. I will try to comply to avoid sanctions. (conflicted)
<b>Values</b>	I do what I do for the good of the children. I embrace the individual goals and view them as appropriate and just.	I see the new accountability demands as good for the children and embrace them.	I value the new accountability measures as fair, just and good for the children.	I do not value the new accountability measures but I will try to comply for the good of the children.
<b>Capacities</b> (Assumption is perceptions of school contextual conditions such as leadership, resources and peer support are similar under all conditions)	I push children to achieve as far <i>they</i> can possibly go.	I can push my students to meet the new performance demands (strong self-efficacy and high expectations).	I can push the children to achieve as far as needed to meet the new performance goals (strong self-efficacy and high expectation).	I am not sure it is realistic to push my students to meet the new performance demands (mixed self-efficacy and ambivalence).

**Figure 2: Conceptual Framework**

**The Impact of High-Stakes Assessment and Accountability Systems and the new Performance Demands on Teachers in Special Education**



The response of teachers in special education to accountability demands will depend on how the pressure of the accountability demands and new performance measures interact with teacher motivational forces, the occupational culture of special education and perceptions of capacity.

## Chapter III. Research Design and Methodology

### Introduction

In this chapter, I describe the details of the research design and methodology. I outline the research questions and then describe the research sites, the sample, the data collection strategies, protocols, and analysis processes used in this study. I conclude with a discussion of validity, rigor and bias issues.

### Research Questions:

1. Given the technical culture present in special education, what is the constellation of responses the new accountability mandates and performance measures generate in special education teachers?
  - a. Do they find the new performance measures acceptable, positive and enabling forces with the potential to lead to higher expectations for improved student performance?
  - b. Do they feel demotivated, discouraged and resentful of the new expectations and policies?
  - c. Do they change expectations and perceptions of capacities and reward?
  - d. Do they put out more . or less . effort, change their practices, or respond in some combination of the above?

### Research Design:

I employed a qualitative, multiple-case study design to investigate the research questions described in this paper. Creswell states that, "We conduct qualitative research when a problem or issue needs to be explored. This exploration is needed, in turn, because of a need to study a group or population, identify variables that can be measured, or hear silenced voices" We also conduct qualitative research because we need a *complex*, detailed understanding of the issue+[italics theirs] (Creswell, 2007; p. 39). The purpose of this study was to shine a light on the complex issue of how high-stakes accountability systems and the new performance demands impact the attitudes, beliefs and practice of teachers in special education. According to Yin (2003), the form of the research questions relates directly to the type of research strategy chosen. A case study design, "is preferred when examining contemporary events, but when the relevant behaviors cannot be manipulated+(Yin, 2003, p. 8). In addition, the intent of this study emphasizes some of the recurring features of qualitative research (Miles and Huberman, 1994) by attempting to "capture data on the perceptions of local actors "from the inside" through a process of deep attentiveness, empathic understanding and suspending or "bracketing" preconceptions about the topics under discussion+(Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 6). I chose the multiple case study design because, "Analytic conclusions arising



from two cases, as with two experiments, may be more powerful than those coming from a single case (or single experiment) alone (Yin, 2003, p. 53). Exploring the response of more than one teacher will also add rigor to my findings. According to Miles and Huberman, "The multiple case study design adds confidence to findings, [italics theirs] (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 29) because it presents evidence that is considered more compelling and more robust than the single case study design (Yin, 2003, p. 46).

## Research Methodology

For this case study, I collected data gathered from seven special education teachers then categorized the data into conceptual clusters, guided by the theoretical propositions posed in the conceptual framework. My goal was to develop a rich, "within case analysis" of each case (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007, p. 242) in order to explore the impact of high-stakes accountability systems and the new performance demands on special education teachers' attitudes, beliefs and practices. I first analyzed the constellation of teachers' responses from the data gleaned in interviews and observations, then conducted an analysis across cases to search for additional themes, patterns and explanations.

## Research Sites

As a long time special education practitioner, I have the advantage of a wide network of professional contacts and, given the nature of my work, I have routine contact with many special education professionals in the Bay Area. These professional relationships allowed me to naturally establish contact with special education program specialists and middle level administrators who assisted me with obtaining district access and permission to do research. My contacts helped identify special education teachers who taught *only* with students with Mild to Moderate Disabilities. I introduced myself via email as a fellow special education practitioner with an interest in exploring and researching the impact of high-stakes accountability systems in our field. Of those teachers responded to my recruitment email, seven volunteered to participate in my study.

The two research sites, District A and District B, were selected for proximity to my work site, familiarity, ease of access and to protect the confidentiality of study participants. Given the relatively small number of special education teachers on the secondary level who work with students with mild to moderate disabilities, I chose to work with two districts as a means of protecting identities and insuring the confidentiality of study participants. Additionally, working with two districts afforded me a greater pool of volunteers for recruitment purposes and the possibility of a wider, richer variety of teachers and classrooms from which to gather data . which would, ultimately, enhance study findings.

This study was conducted at two schools in District A and three schools in District B. District A is located in a diverse, mid-sized city in California. All of the participants work with special education students with mild to moderate learning disabilities on the secondary school level. Three of the participants selected work in District A, and four in District B. Home to over twenty thousand students<sup>1</sup>, the student demographics of District A reflect the ethnic and economic mix of the city's diverse population. The sub group of students with disabilities is approximately one . tenth of the total student population in the district and Numerically Significant at the high school and district level. The two selected school sites in District A met their 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 API targets, school wide and for all significant sub groups.<sup>2</sup> One of the school sites is in an affluent section of the city and has a fairly homogenous student body;<sup>3</sup> the other, located in a mixed income area, has a more diverse population. Additionally, both schools present with a safe, orderly and well-maintained appearance. A sense of pride and seriousness about learning permeates the atmosphere of both schools as well, and was evident as I walked around, buttressed by artifacts and high, school-wide API scores.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 3: Characteristics of Enrollment at Each School Site**

Group	Number of Students in the 2010 API	Number of Students in the 2010 API
	District A	District B
Number of students	23, 588	9, 545
Black/African American	1, 034	271
Asian	11, 857	556
Filipino	1, 411	298
Hispanic or Latino	3, 445	2, 429
Pacific Islander	175	51
White (not Hispanic)	4, 779	5, 781
Socioeconomically disadvantaged	5, 071	2, 322
Two or More Races	615	109
English Learners	6, 275	1, 535
Students with Disabilities	2, 304	1, 348

<sup>1</sup> Source: California Department of Education: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/>. Retrieved September 28, 2011. (pseudonym school site).

<sup>2</sup> Source: California Department of Education: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/>. Retrieved September 28, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Source: California Department of Education: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/>. Retrieved September 28, 2011. (pseudonym school site).

<sup>4</sup> Source: California Department of Education: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/>. Retrieved September 28, 2011

District B is approximately half the size of District A. Located in a smaller but an equally diverse city. District B serves approximately 10,000 students.<sup>5</sup> Similar to District A, the sub group of students with disabilities in District B is also approximately one-tenth of the total student population in the district, and the size of the sub group of students with disabilities is Numerically Significant at the high school level and in the district as a whole.<sup>6</sup> I worked with three schools in District B. Two of the selected school sites in District B are in a relatively affluent section of the city while one is in a mixed income neighborhood. The student demographics of District B also reflect the ethnic and economic mix of the city's diverse population. Two of the three schools have very diverse student populations, while one has a more homogenous population.<sup>7</sup> All three school sites in District B where I conducted my study met their 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 AP targets school wide, but two did not meet their targets for all significant sub groups.<sup>8</sup> Akin to District A, all three selected schools in District B present with an orderly and safe appearance. A sense of student centeredness and pride permeate the atmosphere, with notices and student work on display contributing to a colorful, well maintained school environment.

Finally, this study was conducted in two parts, over an eight month period of time. For the first part, seven teachers responded and five teachers volunteered to participate in this study. After conducting three inquiry cycles with all five teachers, a review of the data indicated that additional information was needed to insure robustness of the research. Consequently, I returned to Districts A and B to conduct an additional cycle of inquiry with two additional teachers, in order to fill out the data collection and insure robust findings.

## Sampling Strategies

Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007) suggest that sample sizes in qualitative research be not too large so that it is difficult to extract thick, rich, data nor too small that it is difficult to achieve data saturation (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007; p. 242). By choosing to work with a small number of teachers in two similar districts, my goal was to plumb the depths of teachers' real feelings, attitudes and beliefs, and receive the kind of rich, authentic data that might not be possible to obtain from working with a larger sample or impersonal survey administration to a larger, anonymous sample. I developed relationships with the selected study participants that enabled me to collect intensive, in-depth data that moved beyond the espoused beliefs of teachers and uncovered levels of meaning; data that, as described by Schein, reflects teachers' deep assumptions

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<sup>5</sup> Source: California Department of Education: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/>. Retrieved September 28, 2011. (pseudonym school site).

<sup>6</sup> Source: California Department of Education: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/>. Retrieved September 28, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Source: California Department of Education: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/>. Retrieved September 28, 2011. (pseudonym school site).

<sup>8</sup> Source: California Department of Education: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/>. Retrieved September 28, 2011.

what actually guide behavior (Schein, 2004). The data collection for this multiple-case study rests on the intensive collection of data from the selected teachers who, after developing trusting relationships, willingly expressed the values and beliefs people might not normally express in impersonal situations such as surveys (Schein, 2004, p. 7). In other words, by conducting in-depth interviews and multiple direct observations, I gained a window into the lived experiences of special education teachers under high-stakes accountability systems and gathered evidence as to how the new performance demands have influenced their attitudes, beliefs and classroom practices.

Miles and Huberman propose a checklist with six elements as criteria for evaluating a sampling strategy. This checklist includes relevancy [of the sampling strategy] to the conceptual framework, likeliness to generate rich information, ability to enhance generalizability of findings, ability to produce rich descriptions, ethical considerations and feasibility (Curtis, Gesler, Smith and Washburn, 2000). Studying a small sample of special education teachers who have worked under the accountability mandates of NCLB from two similar school districts created a feasible sample for my proposed study. The small sample of teachers enabled me to gather and analyze in-depth, authentic data from which I generated rich descriptions of how special education teachers are responding to and making sense of the new performance demands that issue from the federal and state high-stakes assessment and accountability systems.

## **Research Participants**

The teachers in my study teach students of mild to moderate disabilities on the secondary level. They work in five different schools situated in two local school districts, District A and District B. I chose to work with a small number of special education teachers for this case study - seven teachers - in order to develop authentic relationships with study participants. My intention was to create in-depth case studies and gain a deep understanding of the impact high stakes assessment and accountability systems have on the attitudes, beliefs and practice of special education teachers.

The environment and settings of the classrooms of the special education teachers in my study vary, depending upon the model of service delivery. I invited only those special education teachers on the secondary level who teach students with Mild to Moderate Learning Disabilities to participate. My reason for doing this rests with the fact that the numbers of students diagnosed with Mild to Moderate Learning Disabilities is very high, and consequently, it is considered a high incidence disability. Therefore, studying special education teachers of this genre will be representative of a large percentage of special education teachers. In addition, students with Mild to Moderate Disabilities take the California Modified Achievement Test (CMA), or the California Standards Test (CST) or some combination of the two, while students with more severe disabilities take the CAPA - an alternate state standardized that assesses students' functional skills only, not academic progress.

## Data Collection Strategies

The case study's unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence - documents, artifacts, interviews and observations (Yin, 2003, p. 8). The data sources for this interview were primarily interviews and observations with special education teachers in two, local small to mid-size school districts. The teachers all taught students with mild to moderate disabilities on the secondary school level. I used two school districts in my study for a number of reasons: 1) to insure confidentiality of the identity of study participants because the number of special education teachers who teach students with mild to moderate disabilities is small when compared to the number of general education teachers; 2) to widen the recruitment pool, with the aim of recruiting an adequate number of teachers to volunteer; 3) to gather rich, varied data which was more likely more if more than one district was included. Data collection for this study relied on two separate cycles of inquiry. The first one included three cycles of inquiry with five teachers over five months; the second, additional cycle of inquiry was conducted with two teachers over a period of approximately two months.

Perhaps because I am an experienced special education practitioner, I was able to quickly build up a comfortable rapport with study participants. The purpose of creating a positive rapport was to create a relationship that enabled me to collect data that tapped into the deep beliefs and perceptions that lie underneath the surface, beneath teachers' espoused beliefs and values, where the kernel of self and basic assumptions reside (Schein, 2004, p.13). During interviews, I used both pre structured and open-ended questions to gain in-depth information, with the purpose of leaving the opportunity for new questions to arise as result of teachers' responses (Creswell, 2007).

Finally, I created and maintained a case study data base in order to organize and store the data I collected. The database consisted primarily of case study notes from interviews, observations, interview transcriptions and occasional documents relevant to my study. According to Yin, creating an organized and intelligible database increases the reliability of the case study. Every case study should have a formal, presentable database, so that in principle, other investigators can review the evidence directly and not be limited by the written case study reports. In this manner, a case study database increases markedly the *reliability* of the entire case study [italics, his] (Yin, 2003, p.102).

**Figure 4: Data Collection Strategies**

<b>Data Collection Strategies</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<p>Conducting interviews to gather data to explore the impact of high-stakes accountability systems on special education teachers' attitudes, beliefs and practice</p> <p>(First Data Collection Series)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A period of five months with five selected teachers</li> <li>• Approximately four times (including closing interviews) over a five month period</li> <li>• 17 structured interviews</li> <li>• Each participant interviewed three times with closing interviews for two teachers (when their schedules allowed)</li> </ul>
<p>Observing participants during classroom instruction and meetings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A period of five months for five selected teachers</li> <li>• Approximately three times over a five month period</li> <li>• Approximately 30-50 minutes per observation (depending upon lesson and topic)</li> </ul>
<p>Conducting interviews to gather data to explore the impact of high-stakes accountability systems on special education teachers' attitudes, beliefs and practice</p> <p>(Second Data Collection Series)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A period of approximately two months for two selected teachers</li> <li>• Two times over a two month period</li> <li>• 4 structured interviews</li> <li>• Each participant interviewed twice</li> </ul>
<p>Observing participants during classroom instruction and meetings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A period of two months for two selected teachers</li> <li>• Once over a two month period</li> <li>• Approximately 30-50 minutes per observation (depending upon lesson and topic)</li> </ul>

**Instruments and Protocols**

The protocol for this study consisted of three inquiry cycles comprised of an interview /observation /interview schedule (see Appendix A). The setting, topic and schedule for the observations emerged from discussions during interviews. Questions for the post-observation interviews rested largely on the data gathered during observations, with the intention of making connections and finding congruence between observed behaviors and the interviewees' responses given during the pre-observation session. The post observation

interviews (follow up interviews) were collapsed and combined with questions for the second round of interviews due to constraints on teachers' time. Significantly, teachers and I developed mutually trusting relationships and familiarity over time, which led to interviews lasting longer than scheduled, leading to the emergence of topics which brought teachers' authentic feelings and beliefs to the surface. This deepening of relationships with study participants was my hope and intention - the core of my research design - and it provided abundant data for my study.

The purpose of all questions was to uncover teachers' beliefs, instructional practices and changes in instructional practices in light of high-stakes accountability systems and the new performance measures (see Appendix B, B1). The intention of combining pre-structured and open-ended interview sessions rested on the assumptions that (1) teachers' responses to the planned questions may lead to a whole host of new questions, and; (2) that the specific information that may become relevant to a case study is not readily predictable (Yin, 2003, p. 60). Miles and Huberman also state that when running an exploratory or largely descriptive case study "heavy initial instrumentation or closed-ended devices are inappropriate" (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 35). The cycles of data collection provided sufficient information to categorize and analyze the evidence via devising codes to reveal and generate themes, enabling me to write a thick, rich description of how special education teachers are responding to an environment where high-stakes accountability systems reign.

The direct observations followed an observation protocol and included observations of formal teacher meetings, conversations and/or classroom lessons. The exact setting and structure of these observations were negotiated with the teacher during the interviews. The purposes for the observations included (1) understanding how teachers operationalize their espoused beliefs and values; (2) to see if expressed beliefs were aligned with or discrepant from observed behaviors; (3) to gather data that corroborates or contradicts information collected during interviews, and (4) to generate information of interviews questions for the ensuing cycle. Thus, observations provided data for formulating questions for the ensuing interview cycles. All observations took place at the school site in participants' classrooms during real time instruction (see Appendix C).

## **Data Analysis**

Coding is the core feature of qualitative data analysis (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007, p. 132) and involves chunking data into meaningful units that can be applied to the information compiled during the data collection (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). The conceptual framework for this study guided the data analysis, leading to multiple levels of analysis (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). I developed a preliminary start list of codes (see Appendix D) tied to the conceptual framework and began coding immediately. According to Miles and

Huberman, immediate coding is important because data coding and data analysis drives ongoing data collection (Miles and Huberman 1994, p. 65).

Next, I reviewed the data from interview transcriptions and observations, then coded the data by looking for patterns and categories. Evidence from the data was then grouped into small units or chunks, and labels or codes were assigned to each unit. The data was recoded and categorized based on dominant and/or recurring themes, with the intention of looking for threads to tie that tie together the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 69). This analytic process directed the construction of each case study. My analytic strategies also involved building a Conceptual Matrix (see Appendix E) using a prior ideas generated by my research questions (Miles and Huberman, 1994), for the purpose of uncovering analytic themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994) aligned with my research questions. My goal was to seek patterns (pattern matching) or large perspective to analyze the case study, build an explanation about the case (Yin, 2003, p. 120) and develop a thick, descriptive, within-case analysis for each case (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007). Reflection, deeper analysis and interpretation followed. Of paramount importance was the application of NVivo software to my data analysis procedures, which allowed me to code, categorize and easily review the large amount of narrative text generated from interviews (see Appendix D1).

Since this is an exploratory case study, I built each case as part of a hypothesis generating process (Yin, 2003). After the first round of coding analysis was completed, the codes were collapsed into three main concepts: *Awareness of Accountability, Goals and Values*. I then built a Conceptual Matrix using a prior ideas generated by my research questions (Miles and Huberman, 1994) for the purpose of uncovering intersecting content analytic themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994) aligned with my research questions. The Matrix, initially constructed around these three major themes, was broadened to include additional concepts in response to information provided by study participants answering the interview questions. My goal in building the Matrix was to build patterns and bring together responses that belong together (Miles and Huberman, 1994) in order to see patterns, uncover overarching themes, provide conceptual coherence, and eventually, generate meaning and build hypotheses. This process, guided by the Conceptual Matrix and my research questions, directed the construction for each case.

### **Issues of Validity and Reliability**

To strengthen validity, I use rich, thick descriptions, employed multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2003) such as observations and interview protocols, and employed peer review of formulated questions prior to administration. The use of multiple sources of evidence serves to create converging lines of inquiry and strengthen findings which is necessary because, in case studies, the need to use multiple sources of evidence far exceeds that in other research strategies (Yin, 2003, p. 36). The use of interviews and observations also assists with addressing the problem of *construct validity*, because the multiple sources of



evidence essentially provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon (Yin, 2003, p. 99). Additionally, pattern matching and explanation building within and across cases strengthened internal validity, while peer review of data analysis insured clarity and appropriateness of findings.

Strategies to insure reliability included creating interview and observation protocol to document procedures followed (Yin, 2003), and the creation of a Conceptually Clustered Matrix so that meaning could be generated easily (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 110). The goal of reliability is to minimize errors and biases in a case (Yin, 2003, 37). The Matrix allowed me to organize and display the data in order to view themes and patterns, create meaning across cases and buttress my findings. Additionally, the use of NVivo software stored data analysis and findings, and facilitated calling up data to check, review and share interpretations and findings with colleagues who, acting as critical friends, could then easily follow the chain of evidence I built to support my findings.

### **Strategies to Insure Rigor**

As a life-long practitioner in special education, I had to continually address my own bias as a researcher. The challenge of avoiding bias and remaining detached and objective while analyzing data was always present. To avoid bias and insure rigor, colleagues - cohort members and fellow researchers provided consistent and critical friend feedback through the data analysis, interpretation and writing process. Perpetual peer review of notes and report drafts also served to reduce bias, identify inconsistencies in data analysis and insure the accuracy of my interpretations and findings. Biweekly meetings with cohort colleagues to share findings and reports were of paramount importance in helping me reflect upon my own processes and remain objective about interpretations of data and conclusions.

### **Timeline and Activities**

Data collection for this study occurred over a period of eight school months, from February 2011 through June 2011 and again from mid-October 2011 through early December 2011. Data collection of interview and observation data was sequential. Once I completed the study participant recruitment phase, I plan to begin the data collection phase immediately. I organized data soon after each contact so information could be easily retrieved. For the second round of data collection the following fall, I returned to the selected districts, District A and B, and initiated a second, single cycle of data collection. This was done to insure the robustness of my data collection.

After each interview and observation, I reviewed immediately my field notes while they were fresh in my mind, adding reflective and anecdotal information to round out the data. I performed an initial, rough coding of the evidence shortly after collection, with the intention of returning to it later for deeper analysis within the context of additional data, in order to capture my first impressions and thoughts. The findings of this qualitative study tell a rich,

descriptive story, gleaned from observations and interviews, reflecting a complex, multifaceted answer to the unexplored problem of the impact of high stakes accountability systems on teachers in special education. It is my hope that these findings not only shine a brief light on a previously dark corner, but also be of use to policymakers and school leaders when considering the impact of external accountability systems on teachers, particularly those in special education.

**Figure 5: Timelines for Data Collection**

<b>MONTH</b>	<b>ACTIVITY</b>
<b>January - February 2011</b>	Recruitment Efforts
<b>February - March 2011</b>	Begin first inquiry cycle; complete 5 interviews and first round of observations. Begin preliminary coding of data.
<b>April 2011</b>	Begin second inquiry cycle; complete 5 interviews and second round of observations. Continue with coding and analyzing collected data.
<b>April – June 2011</b>	Complete second and third round of interviews and observations; close third inquiry cycle.
<b>June- December 2011</b>	Continue data analysis
<b>October –December 2011</b>	Recruit two new participants from District B; collect additional data for one inquiry cycle
<b>December 2011</b>	Complete data analysis, and begin writing of the conclusions
<b>December 2011 – April 2012</b>	Write up four in-depth case studies and findings
<b>July - November 2012</b>	Finalize writing of conclusions and final draft

## Chapter IV. Findings

### **The Impact of High Stakes Accountability Systems and the New Performance Demands on Special Education Teachers' Attitudes, Beliefs and Practice**

As part of the process of answering my research questions, I provide a narrative of the context for my study. In the first section, I briefly describe the school sites and classrooms that were the backdrop for the teachers who volunteered to participate in this research. In the second section, I develop an in-depth case description of four study participants, framed by the theoretical propositions posed in this study. These propositions guided my data collection and analytic strategies, and helped to shape my in-depth descriptions of each of the four case studies presented. My goal was to find patterns and bring together responses that belonged together (Miles and Huberman, 1994), as well as uncover overarching themes, provide conceptual coherence, and eventually, generate meaning by building hypotheses. This analytic process directed the construction of each case study. I developed a rich, within-case analysis<sup>9</sup> (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007) of each case in order to explore the constellation of special education teachers' responses to high-stakes accountability systems, and the impact the new performance demands have on their attitudes, beliefs and practices.

#### **Two School Districts - Four Teachers**

District A is roughly twice the size of District B, but the organizational, social and economic characteristics of the two districts are similar enough to have provided an excellent backdrop for me to analyze the relationship between the new performance measures that emphasize standardization, and the occupational culture of special education that values individualization and difference. The schools in District A and District B that I drew on for my study were attractive, orderly and well-maintained sites. I noticed a keen sense of school pride and seriousness about learning that was reinforced by the artifacts posted in school offices and on classrooms walls. However, the analogy between the two districts and school sites diverges; while the schools in District A in my study met their 2009-2010 as well as their 2010-2011 API targets, both school wide and for all significant subgroups, the schools in District B did not.<sup>9</sup> This was significant because mid-way through of my data collection, teachers received news that District B was in Program Improvement, due, in part, to the performance of students with disabilities on state wide assessments.<sup>10</sup> This change in district status allowed me to view up close how differing degrees of accountability pressures can impact special education teachers' attitudes, beliefs

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<sup>9</sup> . Source: California Department of Education: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/>. Retrieved September 28, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

and practice. Additionally, during the second cycle of my study, in the early fall, District A also entered Program Improvement, due, in part, to the performance of students with disabilities on state tests. During informal conversations with the principals at each of the five school sites, all expressed concern with the performance of students with disabilities and all reported holding meetings with special education teachers to address this. However, with one exception, at the time of our conversation, no one expressed the need to put additional or exceptional pressure on special education teachers.

## **Case Study Participants**

All study participants worked with students with Mild to Moderate Learning Disabilities. In both districts, Mild to Moderate classes followed either the Resource Model or the Special Day Class model, and all the teachers in my study reported having had experience with teaching both types of classrooms. Resource classes and Special Day Classes (SDC) vary in the degree of inclusion, i.e., how closely students with mild to moderate learning disabilities follow the general education program. In other words, the Resource and Special Day Class models differ in terms of both the time students spend in general education classrooms as well as how closely their academic programs align with the state standards. As we will see further down, the model of service delivery carried significance to my study. Finally, the term learning disability is not a single function and the term Mild to Moderate Learning Disability can encompass a broad spectrum of learning disorders (Lerner, J. 2003), meaning that the special education teachers in my study taught classes comprised of diverse groups of students with a wide range of skills and learning profiles.

In this section, I analyzed four of the seven cases included in this study. To recount, the central research questions of this study examined how high-stake accountability systems and the new performance demands mandated by NCLB have impacted special education teachers. I followed the conceptual framework regarding teacher motivation proposed in Chapter 2, which provided a useful set of principles from which to analyze the data gleaned from interviews and observations conducted with study participants. While all study participants faced the challenges of standardization, the degree of accountability pressures that teachers in my study experienced varied from case to case. Each case study opens with a brief introduction and the context for teaching. I then examined how study participants formulated goals, set expectations, perceived the realism of the new performance measures, responded to accountability pressure and integrated their values with the new performance demands. Throughout each case study, data gathered from interviews is supported by evidence culled from classroom observations, with the intention of corroborating perceptions, beliefs and attitudes that teachers expressed during interviews with observed behaviors.

**Figure 6: Characteristics of study participants by years teaching and classroom Model**

Teacher	Number of Years				Classroom Model	
	0-5	5-10	10-19	20 +	SDC	Resource
Stella				X	X	
Flo	X				X	
Sami			X			X
Joe				X	X	
Dan			X			X
Catherine				X		X
Jerry	X					X

Of the seven teachers who volunteered to participate in my study, two have been teaching five years or less, two have been teaching ten years or more and three have twenty plus years of experience. Since NCLB's high-stakes accountability systems have been in place for roughly ten years, since 2002, this is sufficient time for the new performance measures to have become a way of life+for some teachers, a radical departure and change for others, and the only thing they know+for the newer teachers (those with five years or less of experience). Thus, the range in age and experience among the teachers was useful to my study because it meant that participants had been exposed to both high stakes accountability systems and the new performance demands, and to the occupational culture of special education for various amounts of time. This variation among the teachers in my study provided an additional dimension of analysis for exploring how special education teachers are responding to high stakes assessment and accountability systems, and the new performance demands.

In the next section, I present my findings from the four, in-depth case studies. Each case study is analyzed according to the following domains: *Awareness of the New Performance Demands, Expectations for Student Success, Setting Goals, Response to Pressure Teacher Autonomy, and Teacher Integrity*. These domains come from a combination of a priori theories and the Conceptual Framework for this study, as well as categories that arose while seeking themes and recurring patterns while coding the data.

## Case # 1 – Stella

Stella was a veteran special education teacher in District B. One of those teachers whose good reputation precedes her, I had heard about Stella through informal professional channels well before I began my study. Stella's career began as a general education teacher in a local school district, but through serendipity and quirks of fate, she quickly, albeit unexpectedly, moved into special education. Delightfully warm, Stella was immediately open to the idea of participating in my research and very willing to help out. This came as no surprise; having taught for more than twenty years, Stella's main professional socialization took place long before high-stakes accountability measures were put in place. In special education, the hallmark of a good teacher is strong compassion for students who learn differently than those in the mainstream, i.e., a teacher whose appreciation and respect for differences are buttressed by caring behaviors. That Stella possessed these personal qualities was apparent to me from the very beginning and reinforced later on, during classroom observations made for this study, when I saw that same warmth, thoughtfulness and support extended to her students. Stella created a safe, upbeat environment for learning by peppering her classroom dialogue with encouraging comments and positive reinforcement:

Good! I like that people are looking back for the answer, good job  
ō . can you help [student] out? Thank you. Alright I want you to  
touch the chapter quiz. Everyone touch it. [Student] you did a good  
job looking, I liked that people went back to look, good job ō  
Remember this one you are going to write your answers in  
complete sentences. Okay that was a long time ago, if you don't  
remember, go back and look. Wow some people already know ō I  
see people looking, I like it. Okay now you are going to look. Hands  
are going up. I love it I love it. Keep going. Good job. I see hands  
and a lot of people looking ō (Stella, Obs. April 20, 2011).

Upon entering her classroom for the first time, I noticed that the walls were covered with motivational posters, student work, classroom rules, school schedules and a copy of the California State Standards. Stella's repertoire of instructional materials consisted of district-based curricula and programs. The bulk of the materials she used were made expressly for special education, modified or adapted in various ways to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Since many of Stella's students also functioned below their grade level, she often used a good deal of her materials off-level, such as 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade textbooks with 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. For assessment purposes, Stella relied on a mix of formal and informal tests. In the spring, Stella said that all of her students participated in the California's state-wide, standardized testing program by taking the California Modified Assessment (CMA). Stella did not, however, place much too importance on the CMA because it was too difficult for her many

of her students to read, nor did the tests assess the same information she covered in class:

I look at it; I mean I don't think much because again I know that I haven't taught them ... And I try to encourage them but have you seen what they have to read? Oh Oh I mean algebra, they haven't learned algebra yet. And the social studies, yeah, I have taught them but my book is so different [from the general education book] Oh (Stella, Int. Feb 28, 2011).

Given that her students struggled with accessing the test information and the discrepancy between her curriculum and the state tests, Stella did not find the state tests a useful measure of student progress. Instead, she adhered to some of the traditional methods of assessment that are part and parcel of the occupational culture of special education, such as individualized and qualitative measurements. For example, a great deal of Stella's information on student progress came from checking for understanding during classroom instruction. I saw Stella checking on students' progress constantly, during classroom observations. As I watched her circling the room while teaching, checking with students, walking up and down aisles and checking individual work, I could see that she was making sure they understood her and what she was trying to teach:

Oh For learning, I am all with checking, checking, checking for understanding and they do work that shows and I get it, like if I ask one question, they are like they remember it, then I know that. (Stella, Int. February 28, 2011).

Stella checked for understanding several ways - by asking the whole group if they were with her, by calling on individual students and by talking to students at their desks . all with the intention of verifying understanding. In short, Stella's behavior in class was backed up by her words; there was no down time for Stella when students were present as she checked for student understanding (Stella, Obs. 3/18/2011; Obs. 4/20/2011).

### *Awareness of the New Performance Demands*

Many school leaders now use large, whole school faculty meetings as a venue for viewing state assessment data and identifying which sub groups of students are performing well and which are not. Indeed, this practice is one of the faces of accountability pressure. Although Stella was familiar with such school-wide faculty meetings, this year's meeting was markedly different. In District B, the assessment outcomes for students with disabilities on state tests had begun to grab the attention of district leaders, and consequently, the scores for Stella's students came under scrutiny. While she had grown accustomed to viewing and analyzing the test scores for general education students, examining the performance of students with disabilities with an eye towards accountability was

an entirely different matter. While she acknowledged the change in the district leadership's focus, Stella remained nonplussed:

õ They look at them õ I mean it's part of it for sure, because now that they have the subgroups, and then like, what is it õ the significant numbers õ And so now special ed is one of those groups that you have to bring up. So the state is looking at those õ I am hearing now, may be you can do this to help bring up the scores, and maybe, you know, so now they are looking at the kids and saying you know now we have to worry about it õ (Stella, Int. February 28, 2011).

Since the principal had presented the school's student assessment outcomes in terms of collective faculty responsibility, Stella did not see the school leadership as overly concerned. %The special ed group is not their biggest thing to worry about+ (Stella, Int. February 28, 2011). Putting a positive spin on the meeting, Stella subtly acknowledged there might be a darker side to the message:

Well, they'd talk about you know, like our science department the kids they just do super-wow on the test there, like their API scores keep going up and going up. So we looked at that you know, kind of cheer them on õ can we look at these scores and say this teacher's kids did really well in this area, what's she doing? Can she teach other teachers that? So you can work, so that we can work together õ So it's not negative, you know you can feel negative õ (Stella, Int. February 28, 2011).

Although aware of high-stakes accountability pressure, Stella initially distanced herself from the increasing scrutiny of her students' test scores and the district's messages that the subgroup of students with disabilities was starting to carry real significance. She chose, instead, to view the growing accountability pressure as becoming more a problem %down the road+:

--in the class . or disabilities in the classroom. And now they're worried -- your know -- now they want us to bring them up to grade level -- you know -- So õ I see that becoming more of a problem down the road õ UM, but what I think - like I told you before- what I'm hearing now is, well, what can you . let's see what we can do to help bring your kids' scores up õ (Stella, Int. March 31, 2011).

Thus, when we first met, Stella considered the habitual stance of district and building leadership . one of basic inattention to the performance of students with disabilities - as a %way of life+.



## Setting Goals

The new performance measures require all teachers to teach to grade level standards, and Stella said that she had experienced the initial push to standardize instruction along with general education teachers when California first introduced standards based education many years ago (Stella, Int. March 31, 2011). This push for standardized instruction presented a challenge to her because many of her students functioned significantly below grade level, and as a result, Stella's top priority remained focused on meeting individual student needs as articulated in their IEP goals. On the one hand, this made sense because as a veteran special education teacher, Stella's professional socialization had taken place long before the advent of high stakes accountability systems. On the other, accountability pressures were beginning to build in her district due, in part, to the score of students with disabilities. The push for special education teachers to improve test scores meant Stella would have to embrace general education standards. She resisted the idea:

Right. Well, right now, I still feel like the IEP goals and objectives drive the curriculum. So whatever their IEP goal and objective is in math, that's what drives what I do. (Stella, Int. March 31, 2011).

One reason Stella said that IEP goals were the driving force behind her curriculum was, as recently stated, that most of her students struggled with reading, writing and math. She focused on doing whatever it took to help her students with mastering basic skills. Simply put, Stella apparently rejected the mandate to standardize instruction because she saw mastering basic skills as a top priority:

Well, really, I think what do they need, as they go forward, they need to read and have to learn how to read, I think that's the most important thing and write and do math. So the standards, yeah, they are important. But if they never learn to read, they are stuck, so it's the basics for me. And spell most of the words correctly. you know. be able to write a paragraph, and then an essay. So yeah I guess, my goals for them really should. wherever they start, I want to move them up, wherever they are. So, I just want to move them up, move them up move them up, as much as possible. (Stella, Int. February 28, 2011).

Stella's goals were to meet her students at their level and move them up, whatever that might look like. In fact, by writing individualized goals based on students' needs first, and finding the appropriate grade level state standard, second, she had been juggling system demands with her own sense of what her students really needed, for years. Designing student goals based on what she really thinks they need to know+ (Stella, Int. March 31, 2011). Stella explained how . in the name of student welfare - she managed to work the system:

They can't write a sentence, that's what I need to teach them, and then improve and improve and so now I write my goals, I mean they are related to the standards but lower than their grade level, but do we talk about, like the genres of writing and reading, not really, they don't understand that but I don't care right now. I want them to be able to write a sentence that makes sense (Stella, Int. March 31, 2011).

Consistent in word and deed, Stella chose to respond to NCLB's push for normalization by filtering out those aspects of the performance demands she considered inappropriate. By strategizing and problem solving, she addressed the standards in a way that she could meet students' needs and at the same time remain true to herself and her convictions. In addition, she made sure her curriculum consistently aligned with students' IEP goals:

And it [a goal] can always be related. To a standard, always. You can write it on paper but is that really what's happening in the class. I make sure that whenever I write down on the IEP, I am doing that in the class. (Stella, Int. Feb. 28, 2011).

Yet, despite her insistence on setting individual student goals, Stella was acutely aware of the achievement gap. The sometimes glaring disparity between the goals that she wrote for her students and grade level standards. Indeed, I observed Stella putting considerable effort into closing the gap. One way she did this was by reading the textbook aloud to her students as they followed along with the text (Stella, Obs. 4/20/11). As she explained later, Stella said that although students could not read grade level text, she wanted to be sure they had access to grade level concepts:

It is the eighth grade period of history. But I think it's, I have actually done readability on it. The book itself is about a seventh grade level, reading level. That is why I read it to them. Because seventh grade is too high for almost all my kids. But it covers the eighth grade time period. So, yeah, it is a lot easier. It is more condensed, shorter, that kind of thing. (Stella, INT. April 28, 2011).

By reading text aloud, Stella had found a way to bring grade level concepts to her students who could not read even the modified textbook. In other words, Stella adopted specific strategies that allowed her to bring grade level content to students who cannot access grade level text. Interestingly enough, Stella described this strategy of bridging the gap between individual student needs and grade level standards as routine, not just for her but for other special education teachers as well. This bridging practice, according to Stella, was common among teachers of students with disabilities and reflected the nuanced response of special education teachers to the new performance demands; acceptance, but only in a way that meets students' needs, i.e., on their terms. (Stella, INT. April 28, 2011).

they are in 6<sup>th</sup> grade we don't really do third grade work with them we still want them doing 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> even if the reading level is lower.) (Stella, March 31, 2011). Stella voiced a concern, however, that reading aloud to students when using district approved special education materials still presented some problems; because the text were made expressly for special education students, they simplified and even omitted some of the more sophisticated, grade level concepts. Referring to particular social studies text books, Stella said that she wished the books contained deeper content:

So they need to be getting more of this stuff, like not that there are three branches, but why are there three branches? Maybe have a better understanding of how revolutionary it was for these men to come together? (Stella, Int. March 31, 2011).

Stella had thought deeply about the effectiveness of the strategies she used in her efforts to bring grade level information to her students. Although not perfectly satisfied with her bridging practice, she considered it the most fitting solution because it did not compromise her beliefs or her students' welfare. This stood in contradiction to some of the other strategies in use that she had heard about. In response to the administration's messages about changes in performance expectations, Stella knew that some of her colleagues were using grade level text with their students. She strongly disagreed with this practice:

There's no way . there's no way that the kids could read that [grade level text] and understand it. So, yeah, I mean it's a dilemma for sure. (Stella, Int. March 31, 2011).

In summary, although Stella considered the goals of the new performance demands important enough to find ways to bridge the gap between grade level standards and her students' individual learning needs, she insisted on doing so by using materials or strategies that she felt authentically met her students' learning needs. She did so only in ways that presented her students with opportunities to learn in ways that were aligned with her beliefs. Of significance is the fact that Stella's practice of acknowledging some aspects of accountability demands (developing strategies to teach grade level content to students functioned several years below grade level) and rejecting others (assessments and goal setting) had been a way of life for a long time, sanctioned not only by her building principal but by district leaders, as well:

So, yeah, there's a huge gap because they're at second grade level or third grade level or fourth. And they're in seventh . you know sixth or seventh or eighth grade. So I can't worry about that. I really can't worry about . there's no way . they can't . most of them aren't ready for algebra. And although I do think that you don't need to have all your . you don't need to be able to add, subtract, multiply, and divide with .

o you know, with facility to do algebra. In fact maybe it's easier because there's less calculation. But I think they're not ready to understand those concepts yet. So I . all I can do is say I tried to get them to move as far as they can. And so far the district has been very supportive of that. The administration hasn't had a problem . (Stella, Int. March 31, 2011).

### *Expectations for Student Success*

Although Stella put a good deal of effort into addressing the new performance demands emanating from a standards based environment, she did not, ultimately, see strong potential for her students to reach grade level proficiency. When I asked, she presented a blunt assessment of the impact learning disabilities can have on student achievement:

o the truth is they have learning, you know, disabilities, they can't help it, and that's why they are in here o So o I really think also that we can't pity them and say oh, poor you, you can't learn, qI don't believe that, they can learn, they can definitely make progress for sure, and I don't baby them. (Stella, Int. February 28, 2011).

Stella believed that her students would progress but not at the same pace or to the same level as students in general education. Stella gave several examples of how she saw learning disabilities radically influencing students' ability to meet grade level expectations. One instance surfaced after I had observed a social studies class. Stella had been explaining the concept of westward expansion:

I want them to understand that, I don't know, I think maybe one or two may have gotten it. But, oh you, you didn't look at what they were writing. Sometimes, it's eye opening because I think I'm being so clear. I think I can't think of another way to show them, to explain it. I think there's going to get it. Then I ask or I'd ask them a question and the answer is, I'm like WOW, they missed it completely o (Stella, Int. April 28, 2011).

Stella's perceptions were reinforced by the reactions she observed in her students when they took the state tests. While administering the state tests was mandatory, Stella turned her back on the state tests because she considered them inappropriate for her students. Her response - to protect them from the test as best as she could . was another way she strategized and coped with the new performance demands:

They just bomb it. They can't do it. And they . they'd start out like the first . I think I said this before . the first day of testing . they're

trying so hard, and they work so hard. By the end, they're like, screw it. I can't do it. And the math is really hard. Even the example problems that you read to them . sometimes are too hard for them. So . And I tell them beforehand . I haven't taught you this yet, so don't worry about it ÷ Try your best. But if you don't know how to do it, don't worry about it ÷ we're . we're being . we're asked to test you on something you haven't been taught. So I'm pretty honest with them. (Stella, Int. March 28, 2011).

Accepting only certain aspects of accountability and accustomed to being the expert when it came to the education of students with disabilities, Stella's expectations were grounded in her daily interactions with students and the result of her many years of experience. The question for me was if the same occupational culture that accentuated individualization, compassion and respect for students who learn differently also helped shape Stella's expectations for student success in a standards-based environment that emphasized normalization. Wanting to explore her thinking even further, I asked how Stella how she compared the potential of students with disabilities with other identified subgroups, such as English Learners. Interestingly enough, Stella considered the new performance measures as, perhaps, more realistic for EL students. She made a clear distinction:

Because I think- I think EL, that's language and as they learn the language it's going to get easier for them. These guys, it's really not going to get easier for them this year, they're still always going to have a disability, always. And yeah, they'll become more, you know more mature, be able to handle it, but really reading probably always will be hard for them. (Stella, Int. June 6, 2011).

Stella also made a distinction between Resource students and those in Special Day Classes. I think those [students] in resource classes should be able to - with an accommodation . meet grade level standards; ÷ I can see resource students who have average IQs.+(Stella, Int. April 28, 2011). In short, Stella did not see SDC students reaching grade level expectations because of the biological or neurological limitations that significant learning disabilities can place on student learning. Given this assumption, I pushed a little further and asked Stella if, in a perfect world - where she had all the resources at hand that she could possibly imagine - her students might achieve grade level expectations. Her response was the same:

I don't. I really do not see that happening. I think that maybe if they stayed in high school several extra years. Or, maybe as they mature, they will get better and be able to. I mean learning disabilities do not go away. So, I do not see them actually getting up to grade level. I would love that, I would like that, I try for that, I do not really see that. They do not make a year's growth. We do

not expect them to even make a year's growth in a year. So again, I know I say this all the time, but if they are already three years below grade level. And they are making six months growth. That's what, we would be happy, if they went up six months every year" (Stella, Int. April 28, 2011).

To summarize, Stella insisted on authenticity, juggling the performance demands with her perceptions of what her students really needed. Her perceptions included the view that learning disabilities are a biological reality that influences the progress students with disabilities can make towards grade level competencies. Nevertheless, Stella's expectations were grounded in expertise stemming from her extensive experience, making it difficult to tease out to which degree her views were the result of hard core years of practice versus her long time immersion in the occupational culture of special education.

### *Response to Pressure: Teacher Autonomy*

In late April Stella related to me the news that the district was in Program Improvement, and I had the opportunity to see up close the impact of explicit pressure on her attitudes, beliefs and practice. The previously ambiguous messages coming from school and district leaders gained sudden clarity as the academic outcomes of student with disabilities caught their full attention. Suddenly, the performance of students with disabilities on state tests had taken on a new meaning, not only for Stella but for her entire school. As Stella realized that her life will change, she addressed the pressures of high-stakes accountability with a directness that I had not seen before. Although she tried to infuse the situation with her usual optimism, I saw - for the first time - frustration:

"But, I think it is like that twenty-fourteen pipe dream. Everybody knows that it is never going to be one-hundred percent. And, I feel like that is what is going to happen to students with disabilities. Unless we cheat. Right? You cannot get blood from a turnip. So, maybe it will help us. Maybe we will get, right? Lower class sizes. Probably not, because there isn't money. Maybe we could look at it as, Oh gosh, maybe we will get more support. But, we know that is not what is going to really happen. We are not going to get more aides, we are not going to get necessarily better. Because of the budget issues. So I mean. Kids end up in special day class for a reason. (Stella, Int. April 28, 2011)

Frustration was not the only thing that was new. Stella also expressed concerns about backlash and the loss of professional status; as pressure started to mount, she did not want to think that she or her students might be blamed. When we met for our final interview in early June, Stella was musing over her future. Her reactions ran the full gamut, from hope (maybe they will get more support, maybe they will get it right) to pessimism (kids are in special day class for a

reason+). Not knowing what changes were in store for next year, Stella also expressed concern regarding the possible loss of professional status, backlash and blame. Her gut wrenching reaction was reflective of teachers' responses to accountability pressure that have been documented in the literature on high-stakes accountability:

õ And I don't want people to think, 'Oh if I say like, oh it must be nice', she can just because I have learning disabilities, she doesn't even have to try, you know I don't want people to think that but I also want them to understand you can't put pressure on these guys. Like if they just work harder, their disability will go away, because it won't, they do have to work harder! They do even though it might not look that way, it's harder for them to do all these kind of stuff and you know I wouldn't want them to think, 'Oh it's us, and we are bringing the district down.'+(Stella, Int. June 6, 2011).

Stella's response to the pending changes wrought by accountability pressure included concerns about the loss of her autonomy. As a long time special education practitioner, she felt that she was the expert who knew her students best, as most teachers do. This perception of special education teachers as the experts is just one of several reasons that they have historically been left alone by general education teachers and school leadership and, as a result, experienced a great deal of freedom. Indeed, Stella said as much; 'As special education teachers we have so much freedom.'+(Stella, Int. April 28, 2011). Additionally, Stella's sense of autonomy was reinforced by school and district administrators. When I had a brief, informal conversation with the building principal, she expressed a great deal of confidence in the special education teachers at her school, and, given her workload and competing priorities, she did not consider the performance of special education students her most urgent problem. (Principal, Int. April, 2011).

In sum, it was not until low student test scores forced district administrators began to pay attention to the academic outcomes of students with disabilities that Stella's sense of autonomy and deeply held beliefs began to butt up against accountability pressures. This tradition of freedom helped to explain Stella's insistence on individual growth measures, as well as her views on student potential; her perceptions trumped the mandates of accountability and the new performance demands. Stella's sense of autonomy was also supported by the stance of building and district leaders. Until then, she had experienced the relative freedom to set her expectations for student success and interpret the meaning of the new performance demands on her own terms. Thus, Stella, for the first time, started to worry about the possible loss of control in the face of accountability pressures.

### *To Summarize: A Teacher with Integrity*

Stella had said that she valued the premise of accountability but on the terms she was accustomed to as a special education teacher . accountability to parents and her administrators (Stella, Int. March 31, 2011; Int. April 28, 2011). Stella had also said that she had not covered much of the material tested on the CMA (Stella, Int. Feb. 28, 2011). It seemed to me that she rejected the terms of high-stakes accountability system out right, and in fact, Stella very frankly said that the system, itself, might have to change:

õ So I, I think people eventually are going to have to change their- I mean what can they do. They are going to have to change the standard for students with disabilities. (Stella, Int. April 28, 2011).

Stella's beliefs and values fell squarely on the side of individual growth and care. Her insistence on sticking to her principles, such as the importance of teaching basic skills (which she considered, *sine qua non*) and her commitment to authenticity (using only materials and instructional methods that could support her students' progress) were characteristic of a teacher committed to doing only what she thought best for her students. In addition, Stella's efforts to bridge her students' learning needs with the performance demands by reading text aloud, writing IEP goals to match her students' ability levels first, and grade level standards, second and protect her students from the demands of state tests, are all examples of Stella's efforts to remain true to her core beliefs and values in the face of conflicting demands. Stella's behaviors of trying to maintain a feasible balance between her core values, student needs and external accountability pressure (Mintrop, 2012), were reflective of a teacher with a powerful moral compass and a strong sense of integrity. Throughout our relationship I observed Stella persistently and steadfastly focus on her students as a means of coping with the conflicting priorities between the new performance measures and students' individual needs by remaining consistent in word and deed. As we said goodbye, I asked her how she felt about returning to work next year. Stella's care, dedication and sense of autonomy appeared to remain intact, as she affirmed that for now at least, her primary concern was student welfare, not test scores:

...Yeah, yeah it's not . well it's not about test scores so much ... (Stella, Int. June 6, 2011).

### **Case # 2: Sami**

The second teacher in my study is Sami, a special education teacher in District A. Reflective, articulate and thoughtful, Sami had been teaching for more than 15 years. Although she had initially intended to work with general education students, Sami soon found herself teaching students with special needs and has



been in the field ever since. She described her decision as a good one: "I just realized this is where I needed to be" (Sami, Int. February 22, 2011).

Sami was a resource special education teacher whose job included supporting students with their general education classwork and teaching core academic courses directly. She used a mix of regular education and special education textbooks with her students, and most of her materials were pre-selected by the district, which she supplemented with a wealth of resources that she had made or gathered over the years (Sami, Int. February 22, 2011). Sami followed the district's benchmark system and used curriculum based tests and student portfolios to measure student progress. The students in Sami's classes presented with a broad range of learning abilities. This was reflected in the various ways her students participated in the state assessment program: A few of Sami's students took the CST, others took the CMA and many took a combination of both the CMA and the CST, i.e., a combination of subtests of the CMA and the CST that matched a student's individual strengths and weaknesses. For example, if a particular student was strong in English and weak in math, that student might take the CST subtest for ELA with the CMA subtest for math. Some of Sami's students did quite well on the state tests, while for others, it was entirely inappropriate:

“ just the fact that they are in a testing situation for kid who is being treated for anxiety disorder “ I don't think that is going to measure real well what that kid can do because they are just going to be overwhelmed with the disability they are trying to deal with “ (Sami, Int. Feb 22, 2011).

Consequently, she found her own testing yielded more useful information than the state tests, which she viewed with skepticism:

“ A lot of it is their work, their portfolios, you know how, where they've grown. There might be a student who can't add and if they can add two to three digit numbers at the end of year, that's progress for them ... But if I was to measure it by the regular standards out there or the STAR or CST whatever, they're nowhere on that “ But this kid has now learned how to make change or something “ that's real progress. That's real practical progress for them ... (Sami, Int. April 8, 2011).

Sami was, like Stella, an intensely focused and caring professional. Her classroom was relatively small but well organized, with posters, schedules and notices on the walls, and an array of textbooks on the shelves. In fact, her classroom could have been a metaphor for her teaching style, because Sami ran a tight ship. Moving constantly from student to student to check understanding and provide explanations as needed, Sami worked hard to make every minute

count. When discipline issues arose, she attended to them so quickly and firmly that her approach to instruction appeared seamless:

I like your green. Come on in. Cool where did you get that from? Nice! Yes we are doing groups today. We have a lot to go over today. [student], I need you in your seat. Whose is that? Is that yours? I need you in your seat. Put that away. Okay let's get started group! Yesterday we took our chapter 8 test and I will have it back to you tomorrow. Okay um we will start chapter nine today and [student] class is up here, thank you. (Sami, Obs. March 17, 2011).

In short, Sami was a well-organized, highly focused teacher, who taught students with a wide range of learning needs. She kept close track of her students' growth through a variety of formal and informal measures. For Sami, information from the state tests was useful but in a limited way and only for a small group of her students. Despite her firmness and intensity, Sami's classroom was a comfortable place and her caring much in evidence through the good rapport she had with her students.

#### *Awareness of the New Performance Demands*

Sami's principal reviewed student scores with the whole faculty when school first opened, in accordance with NCLB's mandate for data driven instruction. She also met separately with the special education teachers:

Yeah, we do a school-wide kind of a, analysis when all the results come out. And so, yeah, we as a group gather with the administrator usually, you know, the other special education teachers. We have gone over it. Not in a negative sense that Oh wow, look at these kids. They're floundering. We do go over where they are at. Can we concentrate more on how can we maybe improve our program to make them more successful. (Sami, Int. April 8, 2011).

Since Sami's principal had presented the data from student scores on state tests as a school-wide, collective responsibility, she did not feel targeted. However, since some of her students did well on the state test, she did feel responsible for teaching the content in the state standards because she knew that a certain amount of the material would be covered (Sami, Int. February 22, 2012). At the same time, Sami acknowledged that there was great diversity among her students' abilities, many of whom learned at a different pace and in a fundamentally different manner than those in general education. Given the wide range of learning abilities among her students and the fact that some were capable of reaching grade level competency while others struggled with basic

skills or had social/emotional learning disabilities, Sami's biggest challenge seemed to be ensuring that not just the capable few, but all of her students, met the new performances demands:

“Of course there are kids where I look and say gosh, yeah this kid is going to be, you know, they are going to be well beyond this by time they leave” but then there are other kids who you know, it is a slow, progress. So “what is their comfort level as far as walking towards these, how do I pace each individual kid towards this. So, the ultimate goal is the same, but am I going to reach it as quickly as the standard or the benchmark expects probably not” (Sami, Int. Feb, 22, 2011).

Thus, Sami kept her eyes on the standards but individualized and paced instruction to match the needs of her students, working diligently to move her very diverse group of students on the path towards grade level proficiency. In District A, however, accountability pressures were mounting because district leaders were beginning to take note of the chronic underperformance of students with disabilities on state tests. This resulted in a flurry of new curricula for students with disabilities that district leaders wanted teachers to implement right away. As a result, Sami began to experience accountability pressure that although indirect and not explicit, had a significant impact on her practice.

### *Setting Goals*

As previously stated, some of Sami's students demonstrated the potential to meet the performance demands but were in special education due to social and emotional issues that impacted their learning. “Yes that Asperger's kid is probably brighter and more capable than any regular ed kid who doesn't, you know” (Sami, Int. April 8, 2011). For these students, Sami set goals that involved social-emotional skills because achieving their non-academic goals was a prerequisite for academic success:

“Our goals, my goals are not always academic or all academic you know, we have organizational goals. This [student] could well learn how to write his homework down in his planner every day” or this child will learn to raise their hand before they blurt something out” and that is what slows down the progress, right. We are trying to [meet] these goals that matter nothing to the state, are such important big goals for these kids” (Sami, Int. Feb, 22, 2011).

For other students in her class, Sami wrote goals for learning via a modified curriculum, and for still others, goal setting centered on mastering basic skills. Hence, Sami taught students whose broad spectrum of learning needs required her to formulate a wide variety of goals. During a classroom observation

in May (Obs. May 17, 2011), I saw an example of how Sami developed specific techniques to meet her students' multiple and varied needs and integrated them into her curriculum. While teaching a math class, Sami employed cooperative learning and peer-teaching strategies. Later, she explained that this was one of the ways she bridged the gap between state standards and social emotional goals. In fact, she said that the goals for the lesson I had observed included having her students learn how to % learn how to work with another person, learn from somebody else+, and find out how to %extract information from somebody else in an amiable way+(Sami, Int. May, 2011). However, as she endeavored to reconcile the disparity between the push for standardization and her students' mix of abilities and skills, Sami questioned the system:

We can give them the basic skills I believe. We can make them capable of leading their lives with basic math skills but no, they may not be able to do the Calculus or the pre-Calculus or the Algebra 2, Trigonometry that the regular expectations are you know. We don't have the same standard. That's what special education means. We don't work by the same standards that the regular education does. So why the standardized test? (Sami, Int. April 8, 2011).

She then cut right to the heart of the matter:

õ Here we have individualized goals that a student is supposed to meet. But yeah, they're supposed to also meet what all the general population is meeting also. I mean õ it just kind of big contradiction to me. I do not understand it. (Sami, Int. Feb 22, 2011).

Sami's honest and forthright expression of how she felt caught in the middle surprised me, and I asked her how she reconciled this apparent contradiction. Much in the same way that Stella had filtered out the messages she deemed inappropriate for her students, Sami responded to NCLB's push for normalization by ignoring those aspects of the new performance demands that she felt did not fit her students' needs:

I wouldn't say I reconcile, I just kind of do what I do and let it be because there is no way that my kids can, I can't have the same expectations or they wouldn't be with me. I mean I have high expectations of that of them õ but they are not going to be moving at the same pace at the regular education students are.õ (Sami, Int. Feb, 22, 2011).

In sum, Sami did whatever she had to do to meet the needs of her students and in the process remained true to her convictions. Although she experienced more pressure than Stella did regarding her students' academic outcomes, she also adhered more closely to the general education curriculum. Exerting her considerable expertise and professional judgment, Sami felt

compelled to push her students towards grade level proficiency while working to meet their unique needs. Yet she also questioned the system. Faced with many of the same challenges Stella did, such as the necessity of developing goals and instructional strategies that bridged her students' needs with the state standards, and developing grade level curriculum while making IEP goals a centerpiece of her daily instruction, Sami exercised the autonomy afforded her as a special education teacher by filtering out those messages from the high-stakes accountability system that she chose to ignore.

### *Expectations for Student Success*

Given the range of her students' abilities, Sami set her expectations for student success on a case by case basis; the evidence gathered in her day to day and year by year interactions with students shaped how she viewed learning disabilities:

It varies from year to year. Some years I have students that I say, "Wow." You know after year of my class, they're just going to fly and they do. But some years, you have students who like, "Gosh, this is not okay for them" (Sami, Int. April 8, 2011).

Sami saw a possibility for closing the achievement gap for students with disabilities, but she made the same distinction that Stella had done earlier, that for some students with disabilities it was more feasible than for others:

I think the achievement gap is, we can close it to an extent for a student with disabilities depending on the level of it there's a whole variety of those two. I have students in resource who they, by the end of junior high, they don't need a resource program anymore. So okay, technically they've closed that achievement gap. But then there's a student who's you know, high functioning Asperger's, some things are never going to change for that student. They do have potential. I agree with that completely but their potential is different or it's differently achieved than the regular ed child. (Sami, Int. April 8, 2011).

Additionally, Sami's expectations for success were different for students with disabilities when compared to some of the other sub groups. Again, her perspective echoed that of Stella; she saw learning disabilities as placing a biological limitation on student achievement:

Well, it's because of the nature of what we're dealing with. We're some of these are disabilities that they cannot overcome. An achievement gap for an African American student can be overcome. And we can. It's doable. And I feel that I think they [the state] are not looking at the whole picture. So the state is putting on

blindness in a sense to say, "No, we're still going to throw everybody into the same pot and you should be able to work with this kid" (Sami, Int. April 8, 2011).

Sami set her expectations on a case by case basis but overall and viewed the of impact learning disabilities on student achievement as a biological reality that, depending upon the type and degree of learning disability, sharply limited student achievement. Although I had anticipated that given the population of students she worked with, Sami's beliefs would be aligned with the new performance demands and the push for normalization, this was not the case; her individualized perspective on student potential stood in contrast to NCLB's push for all students to reach grade level competency. I closed with asking Sami if, given a perfect world, a world where she had all the resources she needed at her disposal she thought the new performance demands for students with disabilities would be within reach. This time her reply was positive, but tempered with a healthy dose of realism:

In a perfect world, I think it can happen. Absolutely it can happen because there are students I have that I know if I was the only one in, you know they had every period with me, and just me, and it was me and him or her, and we worked, and I taught and they did, that would do beautifully. But that's not the real world. (Sami, Int. April 8, 2011).

In short, since Sami's expectations of success stemmed from her expertise and extensive experience as a resource teacher, it was difficult to analyze the array of influences that had helped to shape her outlook on student success. As with Stella, it seemed that some of the influences on Sami's expectations arose from her expertise - her extensive experience and daily interactions with students, while others were a result of her extensive socialization in the occupational culture of special education. Regardless, she viewed the impact of learning disabilities as a hard reality that limited students' potential to achieve.

### *Response to Pressure: Teacher Autonomy*

During the months that Sami and I worked together, accountability pressures were mounting in her district, but the messages were arriving obliquely. Without saying it directly, district leaders wanted special education teachers to raise the test scores of students with disabilities on the state tests. This became evident when, during our second interview, Sami described a recent district directive to implement a new program - designed specifically for special education students - mid-year. Explaining that implementing this new curriculum meant that she would have to immediately overhaul her own program and adopt a completely new curriculum, Sami then said she disagreed. Her feelings issued from the fact that not only was she being asked to drop

everything and start teaching an entirely new program mid-year, she felt she had not been given sufficient training or preparation to do it right. (Sami, Int. April 8, 2011). More importantly, she considered this change counterintuitive to the sensitive process of teaching and learning:

We are, for example the district has now introduced a new program to us which we are to start yesterday even though we didn't have all the books and things like that. And then we were supposed to just get started on it. Well, mid-year, when my kids are at a certain place and I cannot start a new program with new textbooks, three fourths of the year is already gone. You know I have my kids on a certain track which you know. So yes that's been the most pressure I felt like. What are you saying? What are you talking about? Because people were actually coming and checking to see if we were doing this. (Sami, Int. April 2011).

Sami was frustrated for a number of reasons. She saw herself as already trying to comply with the performance demands, the timing of the new push by the district was off, and she did not think the district was putting the best interest of students above all else. This devalued Sami's regard for the district's judgment and authority. In her eyes, the decision was poorly planned, detrimental to her students' learning process and ultimately, challenged her sense of autonomy:

You know okay, if your measure is a standardized test, I'm teaching them to the point where they can be successful on that standardized test. And for me to stop now, start something new right from the beginning and take them all the way through in this new supposedly successful method is, you're not thinking about the child. You are thinking that you spent umpteen amounts of dollars to buy this program from somewhere and now you need to make us accountable with it. And that's not fair. (Sami, Int. April 8, 2011).

Disagreeing with the district's directive and, trusting her instincts, Sami decided to start the new program the following fall. Although not all of Sami's colleagues followed her example, no one appeared to challenge her decision. I wondered if Sami thought that the district made such a demand as part of their effort to raise student test scores, and she did:

Exactly and that's the intention with special education adopting all these new because they are feeling like if everybody does the same thing then we can bring the kids all up to speed throughout the district, all special education kids+. (Sami, Int. April 8, 2011).

To recap, although the accountability pressure on Sami was indirect, it was powerful. Accountability pressure can take many forms and in District A, it took the form of introducing a new program mid-year to help bring up the performance of students with disabilities. Sami responded by deciding to temporarily buck the system, reject the district demands and deal with the fallout, all in the name of good teaching and student welfare. Thus, when faced with a choice between compliance and student needs, Sami chose students, and in the process asserted her autonomy. Of significance is the fact that Sami did not object to the district's push to raise student outcomes via a new curriculum; she was willing to accept the new program, but on her own terms. Thus, in the face of accountability pressure, Sami asserted her autonomy because she felt doing otherwise might jeopardize student learning. However, the accountability pressure took its toll on her:

Yeah, I get all of it from a personnel level right. Its there, its there absolutely its there you know there is always a fear of my god you know what if -. Yeah and some days its like well go ahead and fire me I don't care you know so it just, it and that's because you are pressured that you say that because you get so frustrated so yeah definitely. (Sami, Int. May 13, 2011).

This situation also reinforced Sami's view that the accountability system was full of contradictions and as such, lacking in meaning. Ultimately, she considered the accountability system a poor match for the reality of special education teachers on the ground . a feeling that she expressed several times.

#### *To Summarize: A Teacher with Integrity*

Sami balked at the district's message to adopt a new program mid-year because she saw it as poorly planned. Her efforts to stay true to her beliefs in the face of potential conflict, integrate conflicting demands and remain true to her core principles revealed that she was a teacher of strong integrity. Her bottom line was that she would not compromise her integrity by doing something that she thought could interfere with her students' opportunity to learn - such as drop everything and start a new program without proper preparation and planning. In short, Sami acted in accordance with her beliefs even when it involved risk and possible consequence- she challenged a district order.

In sum, while Sami accepted aspects of the push for normalization and worked hard to bridge the gap between the new performance demands and individual student needs, she stuck to her guns when asked to bow to accountability pressure that demanded she act in ways that she did not consider in the best interest of her students. Sami's behaviors demonstrated a teacher who was seeking coherence between the accountability system, her practice and experience and student needs. She was a teacher who, like Stella, possessed a strong moral compass to do what she thought was right for her students. When faced with external challenges, Sami continued to follow her moral compass,



whether it was seeking to integrate her day to day lived experience of balancing student needs with accountability demands, or challenging indirect albeit unexpected accountability pressure from the district.

### **Case # 3 Jerry**

The third case I present is Jerry. As a relatively new special education teacher in District B, Jerry stands in sharp contrast to Stella and Sami in many ways. Young, passionate and well-spoken, Jerry was in his fifth year of teaching special education students. Unlike Stella or Sami, who knew they wanted to become teachers and then quickly found their way to the field of special education, Jerry had not planned on becoming a teacher. His career path took an unexpected turn in college when he met a professor who believed in him (Jerry, Int. Nov. 1, 2011) and, motivated by that experience and the desire to give something back, Jerry decided that he wanted to work with kids. He returned to school to become a special education teacher:

I started thinking about myself in school and how if I was growing up in today's educational environment, I'd be in special ed and it was amazing to me because I felt that in my educational experience I didn't find that teacher who believed in me until I was in college. And so it just all came together and I started doing well in all my other subjects. I want to be that guy for these kids in school. (Jerry, Int. November 1, 2011).

Jerry's classroom was big and spacious with high ceilings and large windows almost completely taking up one wall. A white board hung in front of the classroom and the remaining available wall space was covered with student work, motivational posters, schedules and school notices. Several small tables were interspersed with individual student desks and set up in clusters, giving the impression of separate learning spaces for students to work individually or in small groups. A variety of textbooks, magazines and instructional materials filled low book shelves that stood flush against the walls.

Jerry's assignment was in a resource classroom, a position he viewed with enthusiasm because he considered it an opportunity to expand and diversify services to special education students (Jerry, Int. November 1, 2011). As a resource teacher, Jerry worked closely with the general education teachers who taught the classes where his students were mainstreamed:

Okay I use all the regular materials. I get all the regular books. I use everything that's all standards based. I would say maybe one percent of the time I'd pull from middle school type resource but everything else, grade level from the classes that it's being, you know, used in, I work with the regular teachers to get those things. (Jerry, Int. November 1, 2011).

I wondered how Jerry managed to use mostly grade level materials and still meet students' individual learning needs, and my question was partially addressed during a classroom observation. As I watched Jerry reviewing for a math final with a small group of students, he patiently explained several algebraic expressions written on the white board, reviewing material from class that would be covered on the test. (Obs., Jerry, November 17, 2011). Later, when I had the opportunity to follow up with Jerry, he explained that his resource students - the same students whom I had observed him preparing for the math test - were mainstreamed into a general education algebra class and expected to take grade level math, whether they were ready for it or not (Jerry, Int. November 22, 2011). According to Jerry, the special education program in his school was in transition and currently, his students had limited choices for algebra. Other than taking a general education algebra class, their only other option was algebra in the SDC classroom, a class which would no longer be considered equivalent to passing a general education algebra class. Jerry coped with this situation by offering resource support in his classroom and using grade level text to support his students in their mainstream algebra class. He saw it as my job to try and get them from where they are to passing that class (Jerry, Int. November 22, 2011), and he justified his use of grade level text with the philosophy that presenting challenging material would increase his students' motivation and engagement with school. Jerry explained it this way:

õ In Algebra let's say I have a student whoõ they cannot add, subtract, multiply or divide fractions. Well õ I wouldn't hold that kid back and make them do fraction review for the whole year õ maybe by giving them some curriculum that may challenge them like, solving, you know, algebraic equations I might be able to spark an interest in them which then might make them say, "hey, you know what? I'm actually motivated to finally learn how to actually do fractions because I care about it now õ (Jerry, Int. November 1, 2011.).

Jerry did not rely solely on grade level materials, however, because the range of student abilities level in his classes was broad, evident from the fact that many of his students participated in state testing by taking the CMA for at least one subject (Jerry, Int. November 1, 2011). Explaining that special education students are permitted to take the CMA in lieu of the CST if they have scored Below Basic or Far Below Basic for two years in a row on the state test, Jerry sometimes used off-level resources to meet student needs, particularly when teaching reading; reading is the only area where I think that's where I go in terms of lower level curriculum õ (Jerry, Int. November 1, 2011). Additionally, in order to motivate his students to work on improving their reading skills, Jerry would also ask his students, on occasion, to bring in materials of their own choosing:

“ I make it something that they’re comfortable with or even I had a kid one time bring in a video game manual. He brought in like, three different video game manuals. And I went through it with him and he understood the language because they’re all [about] finding those “ that common ground ... (Jerry, Int. November 1, 2011).

For assessment purposes and gauging the progress of his students through the curriculum on a daily and weekly basis, Jerry used curriculum-based materials, teacher made tests and information culled from his students’ performance on practice assessments released from CDE’s STAR website. Indeed, test preparation was a centerpiece of Jerry’s curriculum, and in order to prepare his students for the state standardized assessments, he routinely incorporated test taking skills into his instructional activities. For example, when his students worked on their writing skills, he aligned his lessons to meet the target skills indicated on the blueprints from the state tests:

“ And then I use a lot of, a lot of stuff from the CDE’s websites like the “ released stuff and then the STAR “ CMA released questions “ I don’t expect them to write a four essay or they wouldn’t be in special ed if, you know “ but we want to get as close to the three as possible. So let’s pick out the things that we can identify and figure out how, we do that a lot. (Jerry, Int. November 1, 2011).

Finally, Jerry attached great importance to the concept of student motivation. Driven by his personal educational history, he saw this as the essential element in improving student outcomes, and he put considerable effort into improving his students’ motivation. This was also the primary way that Jerry expressed his caring and concern for students. During the same lesson where I had observed Jerry reviewing math concepts, I saw him putting this belief into practice. On that afternoon, Jerry opened his resource class with a short presentation from a guest speaker . a former student of his - whom Jerry had invited to give a motivational speech. While the guest student talked, Jerry asked probing questions, subtly steering the conversation in the direction he wanted it to go. At one point he asked the speaker to share any regrets he might have, to which he responded, “not trying+[in school]. (Obs. Jerry, November 15, 2011). In short, the speaker’s message was intended to motivate students and help them understand the importance of accepting responsibility for their own learning process.

To summarize, Jerry was a relatively new special education teacher who used grade level material as much as possible and routinely included test preparation in his lessons. On occasion, he also used off-level materials to motivate students and meet their individual needs, particularly when teaching reading. Additionally, Jerry made engaging and motivating his students his top

priority, and this was one of the primary ways that he expressed his caring and concern for student welfare. He incorporated motivational activities into his academic lessons in the hopes of bringing motivational messages home to his students. Finally, Jerry spent a good deal of instructional time focusing on test preparation, routinely incorporating test released questions into his curriculum.

### *Awareness of the New Performance Demands*

When Jerry and I met, District B had just entered Program Improvement, and Jerry's school in particular, was facing direct and explicit accountability pressure, due, in part, to the underperformance of students with disabilities on state tests. Forthcoming and dynamic, Jerry wasted no time explaining that he understood the details of the high-stakes accountability system. He viewed the situation of increased accountability pressure as an opportunity to try something new and different, and he went so far as to advance the proposition that accountability pressure could become a vehicle for initiating positive changes in the special education program:

I think if you ask our district personnel that they would say that the test scores are not improving and that we needed to think to do something different. If you ask me, when I heard about this last year " I was excited about the additional option for service" (Jerry, Int. November 1, 2011).

Jerry defined "additional options for service" this way:

" we're just adding another variety of intervention and I thought that this being a least restrictive environment " it's broadening our program and actually making it more compliant with what the state wants us to do " So I thought that the real idea is to try and diversify our service ... (Jerry, Int. November 1, 2011).

The diversification of services included working more closely with general education teachers and increasing the amount of time special education resource students would spend in the general education classroom. This would in turn, reduce the amount of time they received services in the resource classroom:

So what we're going to do in our action item " we're going to do co-teaching to help meet these students' needs. We're going to put a resource specialist in a classroom with a regular teacher in the fields of English and math because those are our weakness areas. (Jerry, Int. November 22, 2011).

When his plan to improve student outcomes by modifying schedules, increasing students' time in general education classrooms and diversifying services was supported by the administration but not well received by some of

the other special education teachers, Jerry was baffled. Excited by the prospect of change, Jerry's status as a relatively new teacher - and his open minded approach to the new system demands - gave him a very different perspective and set of philosophical underpinnings than that of Stella and Sami, and perhaps than that of some of the other special education teachers in his school as well.

In short, Jerry was a relatively new special education teacher who embraced the effort to raise student test scores. He viewed accountability pressure as a vehicle for innovation; for him, compliance with the new performance demands went hand in hand with change, a prospect he found exciting. Jerry soon discovered, however, that while his idealism, enthusiasm for change and whole sale acceptance of the high-stakes accountability system were supported by the administration, his attitude and beliefs set him apart from, and even at odds with, some of the more experienced special education teachers in his school.

### *Setting Goals*

Jerry wrote student goals based on grade level competencies and aligned his IEPs with the standards articulated in test prep materials. In this way, Jerry's practice was markedly different from that of Stella or Sami, who wrote more proximal student goals based on students' ability levels. Jerry's intent was to formulate goals that challenged his students in order to improve their skills as well as their performance on state assessments:

And then I use a lot of, a lot of stuff from the CDEs websites like the  
• STAR and CMA released questions because they're all subject  
and grade level specific so it's easy to align those with your IEPs ...  
(Jerry, Int. November 1, 2011).

Jerry also believed in the motivational power of setting high academic goals. Although many of his students functioned below grade level, he reasoned that writing challenging goals was a means of engaging students as well as a good strategy for breaking what he saw as a cycle of failure (Jerry, Int. November 1, 2011). For him, goal setting and monitoring goal attainment on the part of teacher and students, seemed, by itself, to represent a force that would close the achievement gap:

Well I think that if the students start to become motivated in their  
own ability to learn than the test scores will start to improve ...  
Instead of me saying, "How do you guys think you're going to get  
there? [I would say] You can do it. How are we going to do this  
together? What do you need to get there?" Instead of me saying,  
"Just get there" (Jerry, Int. November 22, 2011).

But Jerry fudged when challenged to connect his idea of motivating students via goal setting and attainment with instructional strategies and

materials that would close the gap between high goals and students' present levels of proficiency. Instead of laying out his instructional strategies, Jerry clamored for new programs and courses that were apparently not in place yet:

Okay can I write goals that are challenging yet achievable?+Yes, I can do all those things but to get that significant improvement they need like a course specified to reading and we don't have that. We don't have a course that is just reading intervention and I think that that's necessary in those cases and those resources aren't here and they're trying to, you know, force our hands in certain ways (Jerry, Int. November 22, 2011).

Nevertheless, Jerry's abundance of energy, passion for change and embrace of the new system demands made him a powerful force to reckon with. Hitching his wagon to the accountability agenda provided Jerry with not only his *raison de etre* and the rationale for his approach to student achievement, but also buttressed his view that he had to do something new and different to improve the academic outcomes of students with disabilities. As a result, in addition to setting ambitious goals and motivating students, Jerry embraced far reaching ideas for program innovation. In accordance with his views that accountability pressure was a lever for program improvement and change, Jerry's strategies included looking at the boundaries between special education and general education and declaring they should loosen up. From his perspective, teachers from both fields should come together to work on improving outcomes:

o I'd like to create more discussion around this program o We should have monthly meetings at least where everybody who is involved whether you're a regular teacher doing co-teaching or you're special ed teacher or you're an aid we have those meetings to talk about what's going right, what's going right, how we can improve and then every month we change it a little bit to make it better o (Jerry, Int. November 22, 2011.).

Yet, believing in challenging goals, quantitative measures, self-monitoring and inspiration were not just buzz words for Jerry. His concern for student welfare was genuine, and his belief in the paramount importance of improving students' motivational levels, engagement with school and self-esteem were how he expressed his caring:

o And so I think it matters in that sense, I just my overarching goal for school is I want kids [to have someone believe in them] because this [is what] happened to me and it changed my life o (Jerry, Int. November 22, 2011.)

To recap, Jerry's emphasis on setting challenging goals, motivational strategies, grade level materials and improved state test scores reflected the key

tenets of the state and federal high-stakes accountability systems, which in turn lent credence to his beliefs. His whole hearted embrace of the demands of the high-stakes accountability system was particularly reflected in his practice of writing student goals that reflected grade level standards aligned with the new performance demands, and his belief in the power of motivation as a means of improving student outcomes. Additionally, Jerry saw accountability pressure as a lever for program changes which, in the name of student improvement, encompassed substantive and ambitious goals for innovation.

### *Expectations for Student Success*

Jerry believed that his high expectations for student success were fair and achievable; % I would not put those expectations on my students when I didn't think that it was something that they would be able to do (Jerry, Int. November 1, 2011). To him, optimism, enthusiasm and prodigious energy were powerful engines for driving school improvement. Jerry described his thinking this way:

I get excited. They will bring them. They'll give them the pre-algebra stuff but because they are so weak in with fractions they just get so tired of it and they're just like fractions, I don't do that. And so I found that giving them the more difficult math sometimes gets them to buy in. I don't spend a lot of time practicing fractions but I spend a lot of time on how to solve fractions in different ways with different types of problems. So it's not like they're getting the stuff that they had such a bad taste in their mouth (Jerry, Int. November 22, 2011).

When it came to his views on the potential for closing the achievement gap for students with disabilities when compared with other identified subgroups, Jerry's expectations regarding student success were radically different from that of Stella and Sami. Significantly, Jerry did not blame the victim; in fact, he did not even once mention the idea that he thought of learning disabilities as an intractable biological reality limiting students' potential. Rather, he perceived the day to day reality of life in schools with the fresh perspective and new eyes of a new comer:

There are so many variables that come into those four different sub groups. It's not fair to just to look at them by themselves and say, "Okay well let's look" + I mean it's just not. You're not getting a picture of what's really happening at the school. When you get an English learner who's in special ed who's economically disadvantaged, that's one kid with three different subgroup [affiliations] That's not fair (Jerry, Int. November 1, 2011).

Additionally, Jerry saw the special education program as reflective of a deficit model and as a result, his expectations for student success hinged on the

idea that many things, including teachers' habitual attitudes and practices, would have to change. Given all the power and resources at hand that he could possibly imagine . in a perfect world . Jerry would completely revamp the special education program:

... If you're just doing what you've been doing forever then you're going to have the same score as you had forever and, you know, and I think our special ed department has looked the same for the last 30 years here so, you know, I bet your scores are pretty consistent, just more kids, you know... (Jerry, Int. November 22, 2011).

Thus, Jerry believed that the special education program in his school, as opposed to the students, would have to undergo a total transformation before the performance of students with disabilities showed significant improvement. This stands in sharp contrast to that of Stella and Sami, who had described a perfect world in terms of additional program resources, intensive remediation and extensive one to one student support, but were invested in maintaining the status quo of the core program of special education within which they had functioned for years.

In short, as a relative new comer to the field of special education, Jerry viewed learning disabilities through a different lens than did Stella and Sami. He held high expectations for student success that he considered realistic and fair, and did not even once mention the idea that he thought of learning disabilities as an intractable biological reality limiting students' potential. Rather, he tried to understand the big picture of the achievement level of students with disabilities through the lens of many variables, making perceptive and substantive criticisms of the existing program's structure and practices.

### *Response to Pressure: Teacher Autonomy*

As stated previously, Jerry responded positively to accountability pressures, which is to say that he saw it as an opportunity to effect change for the purpose of improving the academic outcomes of students with disabilities. In this respect he was, again, decidedly different from Stella and Sami, because the presence of accountability pressure appeared to bolster rather than threaten his sense of autonomy. However, Jerry's sense of himself as a change agent . along with his sense of autonomy - ultimately suffered, from a rather surprising turn of events. Although he had received initial *carte blanche* administrative support for implementing changes in the special education program, changes that he had suggested be made in response to the poor performance of students with disabilities on state tests, administrative follow up had been slow in coming:



Well that's kind of a double-edged sword because they [the administration] have said we need to do this they are not following through ... so its like I'm standing here alone and I can't get the buy in because there is always one person saying no, we can't do it that way ... but right now it feels like I'm standing out there alone by myself facing an army on this side and a general on this side who I can't get who is not backing me up and so that's the challenge right there (Jerry, Int. November 22, 2011).

Through interviews and informal conversations with special education teachers in Jerry's school, I learned that some of Jerry's colleagues had balked at his suggested program changes (Catherine, Int. November 7, 2011). Perhaps, one reason for this was that in spite of Jerry's idealism and enthusiasm for program innovation, the level of his skills, expertise and reputation were not commensurate with the power that he had been granted by the administration. From Jerry's point of view, it was a small cadre of teachers who were opposed to the program changes, but they had clout and held sway over some of the other teachers as well (Jerry, Int. November 22, 2011). Consequently, when some of his colleagues voiced objections to his plans, and the promised administrative support did not materialize, Jerry began to feel a sense of isolation and impotence. This complicated, difficult situation threatened to thwart Jerry's ability to follow through with his ideas for program improvements. While some of the changes that he proposed did come about - such as having special education teachers spend more time in the general education classrooms and actively co-teach classes where their students are mainstreamed - many did not. Ultimately, when the administration did not force the issue, Jerry was left out on a limb. One way he tried to understand this was in terms of a generation gap:

Yeah so for me it's not unusual to expect someone to work with somebody else on something but for them (veteran special education teachers] its, you're asking to change the whole everything they've ever done their whole lives. (Jerry, Int. November 22, 2011).

There was, however, much more to Jerry's difficulties than a generation gap. As a relatively new, young, eager and caring teacher, Jerry assumed that the legitimacy granted to him by the school administration, combined with his ambitious goals and innovative ideas, meant that his ideas would be taken seriously and his suggestions followed. Expecting the culture of his school to follow the top down managerial approach found in most businesses, Jerry was befuddled when the sacred cows of seniority and tenure, along with the deeply embedded tradition of teacher autonomy, trumped any top down directives that might have emanated from the administration via his ideas. He tried to better understand the situation:

“In business, your boss gives you some directives and then you follow and it’s really simple. And you know, I’ve been given some directives from my boss and then I pass those on to the rest of the staff and some of them don’t want to follow it. There is something wrong there. You can’t run a business like that. Whether or not the directives from the administration are correct or incorrect it doesn’t matter. I mean that’s the boss and, you know, you have to have that top down leadership and it’s not happening. I think that’s where the disconnect is. It’s not with the kids.” (Jerry, Int. November 1, 2011).

Hence Jerry, having connected with the accountability agenda with enthusiasm, took a long, hard look at the system and found it wanting:

“It really puts anybody who’s trying it like if you’re a teacher and you’re trying to go above and beyond what’s asked of you by your union contract then you can’t. I mean you got to do it alone. I didn’t get into teaching for the money or for, you know, fame and fortune. I got into teaching so I could, you know, help kids.” (Jerry, Int. November 1, 2011).

To summarize, Jerry, a relatively new teacher, found the challenge of accountability pressures to be an exciting and motivating force and threw his energy behind the causes of innovation and change. Soon, however, he found himself isolated and risking professional isolation when the administration did not follow through with their promised support and the changes he proposed were met with resistance by some of the special education teachers. As he mused over the situation, Jerry found himself caught between two worlds, and he began to question his power and ability to make changes . even with the powerful forces of the new performance demands and high-stakes accountability systems behind him.

#### *To Summarize: A Teacher with Integrity*

Jerry, a young, passionate and relatively new teacher was a member of the new wave+generation of teachers born into high-states accountability. He embraced the new performance demands with enthusiasm, considering them as good and just for his students. In addition, he perceived his focus on setting challenging goals, incremental student growth, quantitative data and high expectations as fitting strategies to address closing the achievement gap. However, Jerry was so completely keyed into the accountability systems agenda of setting goals aligned with the new performance measures that he skirted over many of the core issues that other experienced and skilled special education teachers, such as Stella and Sami, grappled with. For example, Jerry focused almost exclusive focus on high expectations and motivational theories as the

paramount strategies for closing the achievement gap - to the exclusion of more specific, classroom-based technologies and practices. Yet, Jerry also genuinely believed that his approach would optimize student performance. Caught between his visions for school reform, his colleagues' resistance and the school administration's inertia, Jerry tried to craft coherence out of the messy and difficult position he found himself in, "acknowledging the conflict with honesty and truthfulness" (Mintrop, 2012). Additionally, although his beliefs were being tested and he risked professional isolation, Jerry remained consistent in word and deed, striving for balance between his visions for school reform, concern for student welfare, system demands and the realities on the ground.

#### **Case # 4 Joe**

The final case in my study is Joe, a special education teacher in District A. Cordial, relaxed and gregarious, when we met, Joe was teaching special needs students in a Mild to Moderate classroom. With his rich and varied teaching background, and long, extensive career in special education, Joe was on a par with Stella and Sami in terms of experience and expertise, but his approach to teaching and dealing with the new system demands was markedly different.

When I first entered Joe's classroom, it seemed on the small side. Every square inch of space was packed with papers, posters, schedules, school notices, student work, books, magazines, and art supplies, lending the room a slightly frazzled but lively and colorful ambience. Very much like the students in the classes of Stella, Sami and Jerry, the students in Joe's classes had a broad range of skills and abilities; some of Joe's students were strong in specific academic areas and attended classes in the general education program while others functioned significantly below grade level; "and I have a range in here - I have probably a five year split in real ability." (Joe, Int. April 6, 2011).

Over the years, Joe had accumulated a large repertoire of non-standard, off-level instructional resources, which he used as he saw fit. While he used primarily district approved, special education textbooks and programs for teaching core subjects such as science, math or reading, he occasionally used general education text for covering curriculum content; "the mainstream textbook is a small resource of overall content." (Joe, Int. February 23, 2011). Joe also had a large selection of diagnostic and curriculum-based tests for determining students' skill levels as they progressed through the curriculum. When we first met, Joe said that he had been trying out a new reading program that the district sent to him in the fall, a reading program made specifically for special education students. It had multiple levels of intervention that was unlike anything he had used before and, calling the changes in the new program "massive", he was still learning how to use several months later (Joe, Int. February 23, 2011).

When it came to state testing, all of Joe's students took the CMA, which he said was a little more suitable than the CST. He considered the CMA a test that gave, "just one more little bit of information about Johnny" (Joe, Int. February 23, 2011). Akin to Sami, Joe considered the CMA useful but in a very limited way. He looked at the state standardized tests from a pragmatic

standpoint; "most of my kids are Below Basic and Far Below Basic, so that's how I look at it as a pragmatic thing" (Joe, Int. May , 2011).

In short, Joe used a wide selection of instructional materials to meet the broad range of his students' needs. As a veteran special education teacher with a great deal of experience teaching diverse populations, he had accumulated a wealth of resources over the years. The students in Joe's classes presented him with a broad range of skills and capabilities, and he used both district-based and non-standard materials to meet their varied learning needs. While he did not value the state standardized tests, neither did he completely reject them. In his eyes, standardized tests provided some information about his students, but were, overall, of limited use.

### *Awareness of the New Performance Demands*

As mentioned in Sami's case, accountability pressure was evident in District A, but accountability messages were communicated indirectly, such as through district mandates that special education teachers immediately implement new curriculum and programs. In other words, although accountability pressure was present, it had not been systematically or clearly communicated across the district. As a result, when Joe's principal called a general faculty meeting at the beginning of the school year to examine results from the state standardized assessments, concerns regarding the scores of the special education students were not emphasized, and Joe did not feel targeted when the principal reviewed the disaggregated test scores with the faculty.

While Joe said that he was aware of the new performance demands and kept in mind the need to prepare his students for high school and passing the CAHSEE (Joe, Int. April 6, 2011), he was not overly concerned about his students' performance on state tests. From his perspective, the CMA was useful for helping to predict how well his higher functioning students might do when mainstreamed into a general education classroom, but other than that, he did not place much value on the CMA. Thus, while Joe did not actively try to protect his students from the demands of state testing, the way Stella did, neither did he worry much about meeting the new performance measures, like Sami. Rather, he looked at the tests pragmatically, taking what information he could and ignoring the rest:

There are some uses, but it's not enough to justify the testing I think. Here is an example. If I have a student or students that are my higher students and I am looking to mainstream or I am already mainstreaming them in one or two classes. That test gives me more information in terms of their you know their abilities for regular, you know if they are scoring above basic" (Joe, Int. May 16, 2011).

Joe saw his students as individuals with unique sets of skills and abilities, many of which were not measured by state standardized assessments and consequently, he did not consider the CMA a helpful or particularly worthwhile

source of data regarding students' progress. His main criticism of the state standardized tests was that they measured only a narrow aspect of the whole child, neglecting to take into account each student's unique personality, strengths and abilities:

“ I mean all the different parts and interests and skills and abilities that the kid might have and they are saying this is “ how much he can make sense of this test “ Okay “ well “ its information “ But you know does it look at anything else “ I mean how the kids got a novel way of looking at something “ as a teacher those things are more interesting to me “ the individuals “ (Joe, Int. February 23, 2011).

To summarize, Joe was aware of the new performance demands and familiar with the details of the high-stakes accountability system, but he had adopted a pragmatic attitude, and did not strongly reject, agonize over or accept the state standardized assessments. One reason for this was his perspective that the state tests highlighted mostly negative information, and he preferred to look at students in terms of what they could do. In other words, Joe had long ago been socialized into the occupational culture of special education, and he continued to view students through the lens of their individual strengths, skills and abilities.

### *Setting Goals*

Joe followed a process similar to that of Stella and Sami when formulating student goals. Using a computer based software system, he pulled student goals from a data bank of grade level content standards, and then weakened them (Joe, Int. February 23, 2011) to match students' true ability levels. Like Stella and Sami, Joe also put effort into developing instructional strategies to help students meet their goals in myriad ways. I saw an example of this during a classroom observation of a reading lesson (Obs. Joe, March 17, 2011). The students in Joe's class were reading aloud a short play from a student magazine, assuming the voices of different characters and taking turns reading from the script. The magazine contained topics of high-interest for teenagers with a readability level and format designed to help struggling readers. All of Joe's students were engaged in this activity, and when some students stumbled over words, he gently encouraged their efforts. Later, when I had the opportunity to talk with him about the lesson, I noticed that the readability of the student magazine was well below the grade level of the students in the class. However, Joe did whatever it took to engage his students in learning. As he put it: “ you got to get them reading what they can read.” (Joe, Int. April 6, 2011). Akin to Stella, Joe considered mastering basic skills a top priority. He was, however, less concerned with finding ways to bridge the gap between students' compelling individual needs and grade level competencies . and less meticulous about the technical aspects of curriculum delivery - than Sami or Stella. In other words, Joe was far less

interested in looking at the overall achievement of students with disabilities in relationship to the new performance demands and the high stakes accountability system:

So the working teacher the person in the trenches ÷ we use the material as means of interacting with the kids and reaching where they are that's the philosophical difference with the idea that you approach it through a standard ÷ I have a subject in history and science that I use as it doesn't matter it's just a device, it could be any content because the real things are helping kids towards accessing all sorts of information in their lives the reading and writing are things they need to learn ÷ (Joe, Int. April 6, 2011).

While he emphasized the importance of student motivation (Joe, Int. April 6, 2011), Joe (unlike Jerry, who considered motivation a key strategy for pushing the new performance demands) saw increased motivation as a tool to be used in the service of helping students improve their skills. In much the same way that Stella filtered out those aspects of the new performance demands that she deemed inappropriate, Joe focused solely on doing what he thought best for the students:

÷ how willing they [the students] are to try and take on something that's hard for them. Those are the issues that we face day in and day out and those are my hurdles. I don't really care if they remember this or that about China or Asia or Africa. I teach it with enthusiasm and I try ÷ to get them interested but it doesn't matter ÷ whether Ghana lasted for 400 years or whatever ÷ (Joe, Int. April 6, 2011).

Joe's passion, goals and sense of his professional mission as a special education teacher were all crystal clear; in fact, his attitude towards the new performance demands was similar to his attitude towards the state tests - he was pragmatic:

I am just not a data person, you know I am really, my mission as a teacher is about you know engagement and relationship and you know developing the kids abilities and it's all individual ÷ you know I pay attention [to state assessments] .. But ÷ it's not going to help me be a better teacher ÷ (Joe, Int. May 16, 2011).

Joe's pragmatism meant that he bent to system demands but only as far as his conscience allowed. He reconciled his focus on individual students' skills and abilities with district demands to teach to the new performance demands and grade level standards with a decidedly teacher focused lens. Indeed, Joe's rejection of the push for standardization was perhaps even deeper than that of either Stella or Sami, who put effort into addressing system demands through careful attention to the technical aspects of teaching and learning and

instructional strategies to modify curriculum. Instead, Joe protected his students from system demands by following his conscience, caring only about doing what was right for the children. Joe's practice of acknowledging only some aspects of the accountability agenda while ignoring others was a way of life; and, following his own internal compass, he said that he answered to a higher calling:

“ I have a conscience and my conscience is my guide, I care that I do the right thing in my eyes right that's the accountability. And a lot of it probably is good enough to satisfy the district's accountability most of it ” (Joe, Int. April 6, 2011).

Much like Stella's experience, Joe's focus on individual student needs and his own personal judgment had long been acceptable to school and district leaders. However, according to information I gathered from informal conversations with principals and special education teachers in District A, this was changing rapidly, evident in the flurry of new programs for use with students with disabilities and mandates from district leaders directing special education teachers to begin using the new curricula right away (Joe, Int. April 6, 2011).

To summarize, Joe wrote goals that reflected grade level standards and tweaked them to reflect the actual skill levels of his students, in much the same way that Stella and Sami did. However, Joe was considerably less concerned with the technical aspects of teaching to the new performance demands than either Stella or Sami; his primary focus remained solely on doing what he thought best for the students. Joe cared a great deal about making a difference in his students' lives and meeting students' individual needs and goals, but he did so only in ways that *he* wanted to and knew best.

### *Expectations for Student Success*

Joe based his expectations for his students' success and judgments on a case by case basis. Like Sami, he expected some students to overcome learning disabilities and meet the new performance demands more readily than others. This was in evidence by the way that he pushed those students he thought capable into mainstreamed classes: “ Some higher kids they should go to college, they have different learning difficulties ” +(Int. Joe, April 6, 2011). Yet, overall, Joe still viewed learning disabilities as a biological reality; “ they could handle the standards they wouldn't be in special ed.+(Joe, Int. April 6, 2011).

What set Joe apart from Stella and Sami, however, was his pragmatism, which allowed him to be generally more open to “ what if+possibilities and to trying different programs (regardless of the timing), in the event that they might work. An example of this was Joe's attitude about the new, district mandated math program that he had just received. Open to the possibility that the new math program might move his students closer to grade level, Joe was guardedly optimistic:

“ The [new] math [program] is probably the one that I am most [hopeful about] - reading how different it can be. The reading of the main source book and then supplemental reading and writing we are going to do the same things. The math is a different approach. (Joe, Int. April 6, 2011).

However, having been long acculturated into the occupational culture of special education, Joe's expectations for student success were founded upon his years of experience and daily interactions with students. In spite of his pragmatism and practice of readily mainstreaming students who showed potential, Joe thought of the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers as “a way of life”:

“ To me that the gap is part of why they are here. It's just part of the definition, am I going to close the gap? In some cases they are sixth grade levels behind I am not going to close any gaps, I am hopefully going to get them move along their skills to get closer to grade level ... (Joe, Int. April 6, 2011).

To summarize, Joe defined his expectations based on the unique and individualized progress of each student rather than by the new performance measures. Joe was imbued with the values and traditions inherent in the occupational culture of special education, and as such, he expected to see some progress from a few of his students but not much and not for most of them. Thus, as an experienced, veteran professional, Joe, like Stella and Sami, ultimately, held the belief that learning disabilities were an intractable, biological reality limiting student achievement.

### *Response to Pressure: Teacher Autonomy*

When we first met, Joe had said that he was learning to use a new reading program that he had been given by the district the previous fall. Then, more than half-way through the school year, he received another new program, this time for teaching math. For Joe, these were the ways that accountability arrived - indirectly, and in the form of new programs that district leaders insisted special education teachers begin using right away. Although the district's intention was to improve the academic outcomes of students in math, this was not directly communicated. Instead, when the new math program arrived, special education teachers were simply told to implement it right away.

Indirect messages from the district such as these, particularly when introduced suddenly and without sufficient planning or training are a potential intrusion into daily classroom life, and are often resented as an imposition on teachers' autonomy over classroom matters. Some teachers in the district, such as Sami, balked, claiming that the sudden introduction of new programs was ill timed and would disrupt teaching and learning, but Joe was more accepting. Joe's sole complaint was that although district had offered some in-service



training prior to of the math implementation, it was very little. Ever the pragmatist, he was willing to try the new program when others refused, if it might make a difference for his students. In fact, it was also Joe's acceptance of the new math program mid-year and willingness to bend to system demands that also distinguished him from Stella and Sami, self-directed teachers fiercely vigilant about the technical aspects of teaching and learning.

During a classroom observation, I saw Joe putting the new math program into play. It was a standards-based, computer driven program designed for struggling students and enhanced with colorful graphics to pique students' interests. Although Joe admitted that he was not completely familiar with how to implement it to capacity, he was willing to try it (Obs. Joe, April 18, 2011):

Once I get that up and running and we move through it I'm hopeful that it is going to make it more sensible. The best thing is that they're [the students] buying into it already and I have this here I have a group that are all too cool for anything, attitude is dripping off of them. And they are like giving us kind of approval to this so far. So that's I'm optimistic. (Joe, Int. April 6, 2011).

To recapitulate, Joe accepted the district's demand to implement a new math program mid-year and he did so right away. Even though he felt that the timing was disruptive and the training insufficient, he readily complied, hoping it might be for the good of his students, though he couldn't be sure. Yet, he settled and gave the system the benefit if a doubt. Joe's need for autonomy was not as strong nor as high as that of Stella and Sami. Consequently, he readily accepted the district's orders to implement the math program.

#### *To Summarize: Teacher Integrity*

Joe, like Stella, Sami, and Jerry, professed to care deeply about his students' welfare and this was one of his guiding principles. In addition, when Joe said that he, "let his conscience be his guide" (Joe, Int. April 6, 2011), he was implying that he answered only to himself, a belief and value he had adopted many years ago, prior to the advent of high-stakes accountability systems. Joe pretty much ignored the new performance measures and the imperative of external accountability system unless he could pull out, locate or use information that he thought might benefit his students. However, although he rejected the new performance demands, Joe readily, pragmatically and prudently accepted the new math program introduced, inconveniently, mid-year by the district - a program purposefully introduced to raise students' test scores. Additionally, he did so without concern or sensitivity for the complexity of teaching and learning. While I had thought that Joe's deep concern for student welfare might cause him to object to the district directive, this was not the case. Although he followed his inner, moral compass, Joe was not very concerned with technical excellence or the myriad details involved in providing students with appropriate and fitting

curriculum delivery, the way Stella and Sami were. Consequently, Joe was willing to try the new program because it might work.

To summarize, with pragmatism as his mantra, Joe did not feel compelled to struggle for balance or coherence between the new performance measures and the reality of his students' skills and abilities. Since he did not put much effort into managing the tension between system demands and his students' compelling, individual learning needs, he did not, ultimately, experience a value conflict, moral dilemma or emotional intensity (Mintrop, 2012, P. 698) when he interacted with the values and goals of the external, high-stakes accountability system.

### **Finding Patterns Across All Cases**

By looking deeper into the data gathered through interviews and classroom observations, I was able to explore the impact of high-stakes accountability systems and the new performance demands on the attitudes, beliefs and instructional practices of each of the study participants. I collected data from a total of seven study participants. While four of these seven cases were written up in-depth, the information gleaned from all seven study participants contributed to the patterns and overarching themes detailed in this section of my Findings. The thick descriptions of the four, in-depth case descriptions were framed by the theoretical propositions posed in this study and guided by my conceptual framework. As I developed each case analysis, an examination of the data required me to look outside the original dimensions, add new dimensions and rearrange constructs. Specifically, through the analytic processes of building and reviewing a Conceptual Matrix, I added to the original, four major constructs of *Goals, Values, Expectations* and *Capacities* articulated in my Conceptual framework, the variables of *Awareness of Accountability Demands, Teacher Autonomy* and *Teacher Integrity*. A brief explanation of these added domains adds transparency to my analytic coding process. *Awareness of Accountability Demands* investigated the extent of teachers' knowledge and understanding of high-stakes accountability systems and the new performance measures. *Teacher Autonomy* looked at how and when teachers took a stand for or against external system demands in the face of mounting accountability pressure, and; *Teacher Integrity* sought to articulate how teachers were attempting to create technical and ethical coherence, given the competing priorities of perceived student needs, professional obligations and external system demands (Mintrop, 2012).

In addition, the descriptive introductions at the opening of each case offer background information that is important contextual data. For example, in the classrooms of the four special education teachers, the range of student abilities was very broad, sometimes spanning more than several grade levels, a factor that carried significance across all four cases. Finally, the construct of *Values* was replaced by *Expectations for Student Success*. A major component of NCLB, teacher expectations emerged as a major variable in my study. Some reasons for this might be the unique characteristics of the subgroup of students

with disabilities, deeply-held beliefs about the nature of disabilities and the deeply entrenched traditions of the occupational culture of special education. Hence, I proceed with examining how each construct occurred across all four cases, identifying the patterns and themes in order to build conceptual coherence and generate meaning in response to the research questions posed in this study.

## **Findings from the Four, In-depth Cases**

### *A. Awareness of the New Performance Demands:*

I looked at the construct of Awareness of Accountability Measures as the gateway dimension for launching into my analysis. High-stakes accountability systems have been in place for more than ten years, and in response to state and federal mandates that schools use data to drive instructional decisions, school leaders often engage in the practice of convening large, whole school faculty meetings as a venue for viewing assessment results from state standardized tests, and identifying which sub groups of students are performing well and which are not. This is one face of accountability pressure. Yet, special education poses a special case as the press for standardization may run up against traditions of individualization.

All four study participants reported attending meetings reviewing the outcomes of test data when school opened in the early fall, and all were familiar with the details of the new performance measures, the press for standardization and the salience of state standardized assessments. Of the four teachers, Stella, Sami and Joe, the three veteran teachers, did not put much stock into their students' performance on state tests, nor did they consider them a valid tool for measuring student progress. However, the chronic under performance of students with disabilities was emerging as a critical issue in both District A and District B, and all four teachers experienced varying degrees and kinds of accountability pressures, due, in part to the low performance of students with disabilities on state tests. Thus, while Stella, Sami and Joe had long experienced the push for standardization under federal and state system demands, the degree of accountability pressure was increasing in their respective districts as the underperformance of students with disabilities surfaced as a critical issue. Teachers' response to this pressure, particularly when caught between their traditional and on-going responsibility to meet students' IEPs and the standardization focus of accountability pressure, is addressed in the next section, section B: *Goal Setting*.

The contrast was Jerry. The only teacher out of the four teachers working in a school dealing with direct and explicit accountability pressure, Jerry was not only aware of the details of the new performance measures, he had adopted the goals and values of the high-stakes accountability system and new performance demands as his own. A brief recapitulation of each of the four teachers and the situation in their respective schools follows:

In District B, where Stella's school was located, accountability pressure emerged abruptly mid-spring, approximately half-way through my study. As a

highly skilled, experienced and self-directed teacher who took great pride in her teaching, Stella had long been very concerned with managing the tensions between grade level competencies and bridging the gap between content and her students' individual, compelling learning needs. She reacted to the news and pending reality of deepening accountability pressure with trepidation and anxiety, but for the moment, at least, retained her characteristic pride and focus on the craft of teaching, as well as her deep sense of obligation to meet students' needs.

For Sami and Joe, who worked in District B, accountability pressures arrived indirectly, in the form of several new programs and curricula designed for special education students, in particular, a new math program to be implemented mid-year. Sami, a teacher passionately concerned with the technical aspects of teaching and learning, curriculum delivery and . like Stella - focused on meeting her students' varying needs, accepted the idea of a new math program but flat out refused to implement it mid-year. Joe, pragmatic and open to trying whatever may work, agreed to start the new math program right away, because he thought that it might help engage his students. He did so despite the timing and poor the fact that he had received only a little bit of training. Joe was, however, also less concerned with the technical aspects of the craft of teaching.

Finally, there was Jerry, a young, energetic and ambitious, relatively new teacher working in a school dealing with direct and explicit accountability pressure in District B. Aligning himself with system demands, Jerry enthusiastically embraced the new performance measures. He considered increasing students' motivation a key instructional strategy for bridging the gap between grade level competencies and his students' actual ability levels, and responded to the imperatives of state testing by making test prep a centerpiece of his curriculum.

### ***B. Goal Setting***

One pattern that emerged among all four study participants was the tension they faced when writing student goals. The tension resulted when special education's focus on individualization collided with the push for standardization articulated by the new performance measures. The discrepancy between special education students' skills and abilities and grade level competencies required special education teachers to find a way to write goals incorporating students' needs while reflecting grade level standards. Long socialized into the occupational culture of special education, Stella, Sami and Joe developed coping mechanisms to adopt and still remain comfortable within their skin. By strategizing, they found ways to manipulate the system and tweak the process, writing goals that targeted their students' learning needs first and grade level content standards, second. In addition, all three veteran teachers considered the acquisition of basic skills a goal of paramount importance for their students. Stella and Sami also put great effort into developing instructional strategies (such as Stella's practice of reading text aloud) to bridge the gap between grade level content and students' learning needs as articulated in their IEP goals. By contrast, Joe covered grade level content but viewed the standards more as a

vehicle for addressing students' acquisition of basic skills than as proficiencies for his students to learn and master.

Finally, there was Jerry, who was born into high-stakes accountability systems and happy to comply with the demands of high-stakes accountability. Adhering to the new performance demands with fidelity, Jerry, too, was aware of his students' struggles, but he chose to buy into accountability's agenda of achieving grade level proficiency for all. Writing grade level goals as was required, he reasoned that writing challenging goals, increasing students' motivation and strengthening their engagement with school were the engines that would drive student achievement and move his students towards grade level proficiency. Thus Jerry, by comparison a new kid on the block, acknowledged the tension between his students' abilities and the new performance demands but solved it quite differently.

For all four teachers in my study, the manner in which they managed the issue of writing student goals reflected how they thought about their work with students. Interviews with all four teachers also revealed that, in spite of the fact that federal and state system demands have been in place for almost ten years now, the IEP still held sway over their attitudes towards teaching and learning, and their classroom practices . particularly for Stella, Sami and Joe but also for Jerry. In an uneasy truce, the IEP tenaciously co-existed with the push for standardization. In addition, Stella, Sami and Joe, who had developed strategies to formulate student goals and still remain true to themselves by tweaking the system, moved slightly underground with their goal writing practices to avoid the attention or ire of school or district leaders. Conversely, Jerry, whose practice of writing grade level goals aligned with the new performance demands reflected his idealism, developed challenging goals as the point of departure for all his strategies, ideas and plans to improve the academic outcomes of students with disabilities.

### *C. Expectations for Student Success*

All four cases . Stella, Sami, Joe and Jerry . were deeply caring special education teachers concerned for their students' welfare. Yet despite this dedication and compassion, the pattern that emerged from data gathered in interviews and observations revealed that Stella, Sami and Joe - the three veteran teachers . held the deep belief that learning disabilities negatively impacted student potential in a permanent, intractable way. Indeed, they viewed having a learning disability as a biological reality that uncompromisingly limited student achievement. Their perceptions, forged through their extensive teaching experiences, daily interactions with students and long socialization into the occupational culture of special education, also included distinctions made among students based on the type and severity of learning disability, allowing for hypothetically better student outcomes pending the allocation of greater resources. In the final analysis, however, they each considered closing the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their non - disabled peers to be a remote possibility. In other words, they believed that they could only push their students so far, and that the achievement gap for students with

disabilities was of a substantially different nature than race and class based achievement gaps.

In contrast again was Jerry. One very significant characteristic that distinguished Jerry from the pattern identifying Stella, Sami and Joe's expectations for student success was that Jerry did not once mention the notion that he considered learning disabilities to be an intractable, biological reality limiting student success. In fact, the opposite was true for him. Jerry's idealism was aligned with the accountability system and his belief in the presentation of challenging goals was particularly underscored by his insistence on holding high expectations, increased student motivation and stronger engagement levels as the main strategies for attainment of grade level proficiency. However, Jerry's concern for student welfare was as genuine as that of Stella, Sami and Joe, and his ambitious plans also embraced the vision that stronger academic outcomes would, ultimately, improve life opportunities for students with disabilities.

#### *D. Teacher Autonomy*

The construct of autonomy emerged as an important dimension in my study. High-stakes accountability systems are external forces that intrude upon the sensitive process of teaching and learning and hold sway over teachers' sacrosanct territory of the classroom. The new performance demands presented a sea change for special education teachers who have had so much freedom, (Stella, Int. February 28, 201), and been autonomous and separate from the policies governing general education.

For Stella, accountability pressure brought a threat to her autonomy in the form of a challenge to her expertise and sense of herself as a highly skilled practitioner who knew her students best (as most teachers do) and had worked out a detailed program that she thought was effective for her students. For Sami and Joe, who worked in District A, the threat arrived in the form of indirect accountability pressure - a district directive to implement new program to be implemented right away, mid-year, without sufficient training or concern for teachers' plans or students' learning process. Sami and Joe, however, reacted very differently to the district directive. Sami, who meticulously adhered to the myriad aspects of program development, rebelled - a response outside of her usual mode of working within system demands. She did so because she did not consider implementing the new math program mid-year as in the best interests of her students. Joe, much less concerned with technical aspects of teaching and learning, agreed to start the math program as directed. Pragmatic and willing to see how things go, Joe needed autonomy in shaping the human side of relationships but ceded it in the technical aspects of instruction. Joe insisted on following the intuitions of his conscience which told him what was appropriate service for his students; but a similar commitment to technical excellence in craft was far less in evidence. Regardless, the difference among the three veteran teachers told them what was best for students - a valued assumption upon which the external accountability system intruded.

For Jerry, his alignment with system demands and empowerment by school administrators fueled his sense of autonomy. Jerry felt enabled to criticize

both the entrenched culture of his older colleagues and the failed approaches of the past because he considered his views superior. In his classroom, the accountability system made him feel more autonomous because he was empowered to act out of an idealism that was concordant with system demands. However, beyond the classroom, Jerry's autonomy became isolation when his colleagues resisted his ideas for change and his bosses abandoned him.

#### *E. Teacher Integrity*

In the domain of *Teacher Integrity*, I looked at teachers' attempts to create technical and ethical coherence as they sought balance, integration and relief from the tension created by the competing priorities of external system demands, perceived student needs and their sense of professional obligations (Mintrop, 2012). Stella and Sami strived for coherence when they worked to balance system demands and institutional obligations with the compulsion to follow their inner dictates and meet their students' compelling, individual needs. Joe's pragmatism can also be viewed similarly if one sees it as prudent strategizing and as a survival mechanism for dealing with the demands of the external accountability system versus his sense of what was best for his students. Ultimately, it was this struggle to find balance and manage the tension between their students' needs and the new performance demands that led each of them to find their own solutions for negotiating the competing priorities of the external accountability system, their internal values and perceived students' learning needs.

Yet, as accountability pressure in their respective districts increased, the freedom for Stella, Joe and Sami to pursue their own solutions decreased. Stella, faced with the prospect of greater scrutiny and stronger accountability demands, could only speculate on her possible, future responses to the dilemma high stakes accountability pressure forces on special education teachers. Sami and Joe got a taste of the dilemma when they faced the problem of choosing compliance with district directives or following their professional judgment about teaching and learning. Jerry was the only teacher for whom the compelling issue of the discrepancy between his students' needs and the new performance measures was not problematic, because he aligned his goals and perceptions with system demands. However, Jerry also struggled, but his struggles were vastly different than that of Stella, Sami and Joe. By following the moral imperatives and values reflected in the external accountability system, Jerry skirted over the discrepancy between his students' abilities and grade level standards and set his inner compass by the light of the new performance demands. Consequently, Jerry's struggle for coherence grew out of the clash between his ideals and the entrenched values of the occupational culture of special education.

In sum, all four teachers set and followed a moral, internal compass to guide them through the maze of conflicting priorities created by the demands of the external accountability system. Although they each struggled with the search for balance and coherence in different ways, the looming presence of accountability pressure forced them to make choices about how to negotiate their

inner values, system demands and students' compelling learning needs, while maintaining a sense of professional integrity.



## CHAPTER V – Conclusion

Specifically, there appears to be a basic disconnect between NCLB's focus on school level accountability, which places the school's success above the individual student's success, and IDEAs focus on the educational experiences of the individual student (Olsen, 2004, in Eckes and Swando, 2009, pp. 2491).

The 2001 passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) codified high-stakes accountability systems and altered the topography of public education, and nowhere is this more obvious than in the field of special education. Until the 2001 passage of NCLB, special education teachers and their students inhabited a world that ran parallel to but distinctly separate from that of general education. Teachers developed individualized achievement goals, tailored instruction to meet the unique needs of each student and often measured academic progress against incremental growth targets rather than grade level norms. The new performance demands changed all that. There is, however, also a dark side to this specialized and individualized approach; once students enter special education, they never leave. The implication is that special education students risk missing out on the challenges, expectations and educational opportunities offered to students in general education, a perception that most certainly influenced policy makers when crafting NCLB and the new performance demands.

For those of us in special education, NCLB brought a sea change. The mandate that all children participate in statewide assessment and reporting systems, including previously excluded subgroups, made explicit - for the first time - the academic achievement of students with disabilities. Having served as a teacher, principal and curriculum administrator in special education, understanding the impact of high-stakes accountability systems and the new performance demands on teachers' attitudes, beliefs and practice was especially important to me. At the outset, many of us inveighed against the new performance measures as unfair; for all but a small percentage of students with disabilities they were seen as grossly inappropriate. However, when accountability pressure forced district leaders to pay closer attention to the academic performance of students with disabilities, they pushed those of us in middle management towards better student outcomes, and we, in turn, pressured teachers. As my colleagues began talking about the challenges of building a data driven culture and the effort required to push our students to grade level standards, I wondered about the authenticity, depth and breadth of the changes, and I asked myself what was happening in teachers' hearts and minds. What were they really thinking, and what changes would they bring to their classroom practice?

My purpose in conducting this study was to understand the impact of high-stakes accountability systems and the new performance demands on the

attitudes, beliefs and practice of special education teachers. The questions that guided my study were: How do teachers in special education respond to and make sense of the new performance demands that issue from the new federal and state high-stakes accountability systems? Given the technical culture of special education, do they find the new performance measures acceptable and positive forces that lead to potentially higher expectations of capacity and reward . or do they end up feeling demotivated, resentful and discouraged? Do they change their practices, put out more or less effort, or respond in some combination of the above?

To address these questions, I began with a review of the literature that encompassed the history of federal and state policies governing public education, studies of teacher motivation, and research examining the occupational culture of special education. I found that NCLB was the most recent reincarnation of many years of federal policies regulating public education in pursuit of greater educational equity, and a paradigm shift in educational policy making. By spotlighting the academic achievement of previously underachieving student groups and emphasizing student outcomes rather than program inputs, NCLB laid full responsibility for student achievement on the doorstep of districts and schools.

My research also looked at studies reviewing the occupational culture of special education. Some of these studies, raising insightful questions about the power differential involved in defining difference, disability and "normal", altered my perceptions of a field I thought I knew well. I found myself examining my own deeply held beliefs about the potential for student success, and analyzing the effectiveness of the various programs I have served in over the years. I concluded that while state and federal policies supporting special education programs have resulted in the provision of much needed services, for a large majority of students the promise of increased educational equity and improved life opportunities has yet to materialize.

Finally, I conducted an extensive review of the literature on teacher motivation. Since high-stakes accountability is at its core intended to be a system for motivating teachers, theories of teacher motivation became central to my study and the primary lens through which I viewed and organized my research. I found many studies describing teachers' work as intrinsically motivating, and quite a few that looked at the impact of high-stakes accountability systems and externally imposed motivational programs on teachers' internal motivation. I concluded from the literature that external motivational systems can and did, at times, positively impact teachers and result in their coming together to work for a common set of explicit goals, but few of these externally imposed motivational programs brought about deep, sustainable reforms or consistently reached those subgroups of students they were intended to serve. Surprisingly, I found a paucity of research that looked at these same issues in relationship to teachers in special education. Thus, it was my hope that any new knowledge gleaned from this study would fill this gap in the literature, as well as provide policymakers and educational leaders with an understanding of how special education teachers are responding to the new performance demands. When school leaders acquire

more knowledge about how special education teachers are responding to NCLB and the new performance demands, they will be better equipped to support them in the effort to improve the achievement levels of students with disabilities.

### **The Dilemma Revisited and Refined**

Using a case study format, this research study focused on interviewing and observing seven special education teachers of students with mild to moderate learning disabilities on the secondary school level. All seven teachers were well-meaning and engaged teachers who volunteered to participate in this study because their interest was piqued by the topic of my research. Perhaps because I am also a life-long practitioner in the field, a positive rapport was established right away. Out of the total case selection, I selected four cases to study in depth. Three of the four selected teachers were veteran, special education teachers, and one was a young, relatively new teacher. I selected these four teachers for a number of reasons: (1) professing strong caring for their students' welfare, they expressed the attitudes and beliefs reflective of the kind of teachers that high-stakes accountability systems must reach, in order for it to work for special education; (2) the variation among them offered multiple lenses with which I could study the phenomenon: there were generational differences, and differences in work context, and differences in the kinds of accountability pressures encountered by these four teachers that I could take advantage of. Depending upon how they perceived the gap between their students' actual skills and grade level competencies, these four teachers developed unique strategies to cope with and manage the tension between their students' compelling learning needs, grade level competencies and the obligation to meet system demands. The nature and type of these strategies became key findings in my study.

NCLB puts forth the proposition that a majority of students with disabilities can and should be achieving at the same academic levels as their non-disabled peers. Holding districts, schools and teachers accountable for bringing students up to proficiency, the new performance demands mandate that special education teachers bring students up to grade level and pass the state tests, regardless of students' actual skill levels, abilities, or the cogent impact a disability can have on learning. This call for standardization of something that appears to be exceptionally resistant epitomizes the fundamental disconnect between special education and general education and frames the dilemma for special education teachers working in a standardizing, high-stakes environment. For whatever reason, the achievement gap for special education students is especially wide and requires approaches for its closing that do not come to educators with facility. What makes this enormously challenging problem a dilemma is the fact that the solutions tried by educators attenuate the problem in some respects, but leaves much to be desired. Whether educators embrace or reject accountability demands, individualize or standardize, accept or rebel against ~~a~~ difference, the problem seems just as intractable. When contradictory solutions produce similarly desirable or undesirable outcomes, one faces a

dilemma. A dilemma cannot be solved; it needs to be coped with. This is what my four cases are all about.

Each teacher in my study is unique in how he or she copes, but across the cases I found that there were four salient dimensions of this coping mechanism. The four dimensions of coping include: teachers' perceptions of the prominence and significance of the gap between their students' skills and abilities and grade level norms; expectations for student success and how teachers rationalize (or explain away) the gap; instructional strategies evident in classroom practice that teachers develop to cope with the gap (in the hopes of moving students closer to grade level competencies); and, a sense of professional responsibility, specifically, in what areas teachers claimed and demanded autonomy, and what they did or did not do when faced with pressure generated by external system demands.

Overall, special education teachers' perceptions of the achievement gap between students with disabilities and grade level competencies influence how they cope with the dilemma. Hence, Stella, an experienced, highly skilled veteran special education teacher, viewed high-stakes accountability systems and the new performance demands with intense skepticism. (But I think it is like that twenty-fourteen pipe dream ÷ Stella, Int. April 28, 2011). Filtering out those aspects of the new performance demands that she perceived as inappropriate and unfair, such as the state tests which she considered to be too difficult for most of her students, she coped by being intensely focused on her students' learning needs, putting great effort into developing instructional strategies to bridge the gap, and insisting on authenticity in teaching. Stella viewed learning disabilities as a biological reality that limited student potential; her hopes for student success centered on teaching her students basic skills and moving them up, whatever that might look like. To this end, she used only instructional materials she thought beneficial for her students and protected them from the demands of the state tests. For Stella, the primary, compelling mission of meeting students' individual learning needs trumped accountability demands to raise students' test scores.

Sami, like Stella, was a veteran special education teacher with a great deal of knowledge and expertise. Keenly focused on her students' compelling learning needs, she considered the state tests useful, but only in a very limited way and for a small group of students. Sami, too, perceived learning disabilities a condition that intractably limited student potential and although she pushed her students, she believed that only a few capable of reaching grade level competency. She coped by focusing on the technical aspects of teaching and learning, such as fidelity to curriculum and program design. Unable to filter out those aspects of the performance demands she found troubling and contradictory, Sami suffered, questioning both the logic and meaningfulness of the accountability system. Hence, when a district directive requiring teachers to implement a new program mid-year, Sami balked and refused to do so. Believing that she was already working hard to comply with system demands, she decided - in the name of good teaching - to buck the district's directive . at least

temporarily. When faced with a choice between compliance and student needs, Sami chose students.

Joe, the third veteran teacher, was also experienced and knowledgeable. Like Stella and Sami, he viewed the new performance measures with a critical eye. He was not, however, overly concerned with his students' performance on the state tests; rather, he took the information he found useful use and ignored the rest. Joe, too, perceived learning disabilities as a biological condition permanently limiting students' potential and like Stella and Sami, he considered mastery of grade level standards a reality for only a few students. Joe coped by focusing on increasing his students' engagement with school and helping them acquire basic skills. Viewing his students' needs solely through the lens of their individual strengths, abilities and skills, he pretty much ignored the achievement gap between his students and their non-disabled peers in general education. Calling himself pragmatic, Joe was considerably less meticulous about the technical aspects of teaching than Stella or Sami, which fit with his "whatever works" attitude. Thus, when district demands to implement a new program mid-year arose, he readily acquiesced.

Jerry, a young, passionate and relatively new special education teacher, perceived accountability pressure as a positive force and a vehicle for change and was optimistic about the possibility of moving his students toward grade level standards. He considered the achievement gap to be a result of the cycle of failure many special education students experience, rather than an intractable, biological condition limiting students' learning potential. Jerry's primary coping strategy was to emphasize student motivation and to this end, he wrote challenging goals and emphasized grade level curriculum. He was not, however, a keen observer of student needs and emphasized motivational strategies over the technical details essential to students' learning process. Thus, the system allowed Jerry to perceive student needs in a way that was aligned with his personal preferences. Jerry's sense of autonomy, bolstered by his alignment with system demands (and empowerment by school administrators) lacked strong underpinnings, and when his colleagues resisted his efforts at program change and the school administrators did not follow through with promised support, it began to quickly dissipate. It is also of significance that across all dimensions, Jerry's responses and coping skills stand in sharp contrast to those of Stella, Sami and Joe. Representative of a subset of young, ambitious and enthusiastic new teachers stimulated by the values high-stakes accountability is intended to generate, Jerry's responses to the dilemma lead me to the finding that there may be a generational aspect to how special education teachers respond to the new performance demands.

### **Study Limitations**

My purpose in conducting an in-depth study was to delve below the surface layers of assumptions to reach the deeper beliefs of special education teachers in response to the pressures of high-stakes accountability systems and the new performance measures. During a period of five months, I developed

trusting relationships that allowed me to gather rich data through the process of interviews and classroom observations with seven study participants. Classroom observations served to cross check case study data obtained during interviews and validate teachers expressed beliefs (Yin, 2003) thereby strengthening the validity of my findings. The primary limitations of this study were time constraints and formulating conclusions based on perceptions of a small sample size of teachers. To validate my findings, and to ameliorate any bias that may have influenced my study, I examined and reflected upon my own practice and consistently reviewed my findings with other critical friends (Creswell, 2009). In this way, I made sure that my conclusions were supported by evidence that I had collected over the course of my study. By seeking and establishing patterns found across cases to generate meaning, my critical friends were able to support the rigor of my analysis, confirm my findings as appropriately unbiased, and focus on validity and reliability issues.

Avoiding bias was especially important to me, because as a long time practitioner I have to vigilantly avoid injecting my perceptions into study findings. The data that I collected to explore how high-stakes accountability systems are impacting the beliefs, attitudes and practice of special education teachers revealed that special education teachers have intuitively developed strategies to manage the gap between their students learning needs and grade level standards. Thus, while the scope of this study is limited, my study findings have added to the body of literature on high-stakes accountability systems by focusing on teachers of students with disabilities. Understanding their responses is critically important to the effort to raise student achievement and close the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers, thereby warranting the attention of school and district leaders.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Leadership and Practice**

More than ten years after the implementation of NCLB, closing the achievement gap for students with disabilities remains unchanged. A critical educational issue with social-economic and political ramifications, it presents huge challenges for special education teachers and school leaders. If district and school leaders hold special education teachers accountable for their students' performance on state standardized assessments, it is important that they pay serious and sustained attention to the learning needs of students with disabilities and provide on-going, multiple faceted administrative support for special education teachers. Throughout this study, special education teachers repeatedly spoke about their effort to balance students' often compelling learning needs with the new performance demands. They did this individually, without administrative support and typically without the support of colleagues. School leaders should consider changes that allow teachers time for increased collaboration with other special education teachers as well as with general education teachers around curriculum issues. In this way, special education teachers can share materials and ideas, learn from others' expertise, and create common understandings of

how students with disabilities benefit from participation in the general education curriculum.

Further, school leaders ought to communicate more often, more consistently, and well in advance, with special education teachers about anticipated program reforms. The directive from District A to start the new math program now revealed a lack of sensitivity about teachers and students needs. In the case of Jerry, accountability pressure forced school leaders to pay attention to the program for students with disabilities but their attention span was short, resulting in a lack of program cohesion and fragmented teacher relationships. The literature shows that with thoughtful planning, follow through, decisive leadership and clear communication, teachers can coalesce around a common goal. Ultimately, when there is conflict among teachers, such as in Jerry's school, it negatively influences school climate and it is the students who suffer.

### **Researcher's Final Thoughts**

The question remains if high-stakes accountability systems generate realistic or unrealistic expectations for students with disabilities. Forced to re-examine my expectations for student success, pedagogy and our assessment practices, I discovered that there are other, and perhaps better, instructional practices and ways of doing things, and I saw many of my colleagues reacting in similar ways. First and foremost, I came face to face with my own set of low expectations. Accountability pressure forced me to examine my expectations for student success, encourage my colleagues to work on increasing and improving professional development efforts, seek out new assessments and work towards building a data drive culture. These are all positive changes and we now have assessments that yield quantitative data and can apply the data to instructional decision making. At the same time, we painfully recognize the inappropriateness of the state tests for many students and resent spending valuable instructional time administering assessments . and being held accountable to . tests that many students cannot read. Hence, accountability pressure and the new performance demands yield decidedly mixed results.

This study was implemented with the intention of helping others, school leaders and teachers, to understand the complexity of implementing external motivational policies, such as NCLB, and its impact on those whose job it is to raise student achievement. I hoped to discover what special education teachers were really thinking about accountability because the mandates of the new performance demands are a huge shift away from our traditional ways of doing and thinking. While the perception that the achievement gap is fundamentally different for students with disabilities was new to me, accountability pressure has forced me to acknowledge the fact that I had become complacent about the achievement gap between our students and their non-disabled peers. To me, accountability pressure also represents a double edged sword because it challenges special teachers expectations and deep assumptions, with the intention of bringing about beneficial changes in teaching and learning that will

raise student outcomes equitably. At the same time, to hold special education teachers accountable for assessment results that test material not appropriate for their students and not included in their curriculum creates resentment and decreases the meaningfulness of the accountability system for teachers. Additionally, this type of accountability pressure could force dedicated, skilled and valuable teachers to leave the field.

With that said, I offer this study to raise the awareness of school and district leadership in the hope that it will result in increased support for special education teachers. I also hope that the spotlight that NCLB helped to shine on those long, darkened corners of special education will raise the achievement levels of those students whom we thought we were serving well but were in reality, still pushing aside.



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## APPENDIX A

### Data Collection Schedule

#### Data Collection Schedule # 1 February - March 2011

Participant	School	Special Ed Assignment	Interview #1. Date	Observ. #1 Date
F1	School # 1 (District A)			
F2	School #1 (District A)			
L1	School # 3 (District B)			
F3	School #2 (District A)			
L2	School # 4 (District B)			

#### Data Collection Schedule # 2 March - April 2011

Participant	School	Special Ed Assignment	Interview # 2 Date	Observ. # 2 Date
F1	School # 1 (District A)	Mixed day class & resource		
F2	School #1 (District A)	Special Day Class		
L1	School # 3 (District B) *	Special Day Class		
F3	School #2 (District A)	Resource		
L2	School # 4 (District B)	Special Day Class		

Data Collection Schedule # 3 April . June 2011

Participant	School	Special Ed Assignment	Interv. #3 Date	Observ.# 3 Date	Final Int. Date
F1	School # 1 (District A)	Mixed day class & resource			
F2	School #1 (District A)	Special Day Class			
L1	School # 3 (District B) *	Special Day Class			
F3	School #2 (District A)	Resource			
L2	School # 4 (District B)	Special Day Class			

Fall Data Collection Schedule 2011 October . December 2011

Participant	School	Special Ed Assignment	Interv. #1 Date	Obs. #1 Date	Interv.#2 Date
GHS 2	School #3 (District B)	Mixed day class & resource			
GHS1	School #3 (District B)	Resource Specialist			

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Questions for Inquiry Cycle 1 Getting to Know You+

1. Including this year, how many years have you been teaching?
2. Why did you decide to go into special education?
3. What grade level and how many classes/ students/subjects do you teach?
4. Did your students participate in statewide testing last year or the year before? Which tests? Did you see the test results?
5. Do you target any instructional effort towards the state tests? What do you do?
6. Have the test provided you with any kind of helpful information that you can use in your instruction? If yes, how have they been helpful?
7. If the tests have not been helpful, what materials do you use to measure students progress?
8. Do you use any specific curriculum or state adopted text in your classes? If not, what materials do you use?
9. How do you expect your students to do these tests? Have your expectations been proven right?
10. Do parents ask to discuss test results from state testing with you? If so, what are they interested in?
11. Does the building principal and/or director of special education for your school district discuss the results of state tests with you? What kind of discussions do you have? What are their concerns?
12. Do you and your colleagues discuss the results of your students' scores on state standardized tests? If so, what is the focus of these discussions?

APPENDIX B1

Interview Questions

Surface

versus

Deep

<p>Informational</p>	<p>How many years have you been teaching?</p> <p>What grades / subjects / how many classes do you teach?</p> <p>What type of classes do you teach (resource or separate)?</p> <p>Why did you choose this profession?</p> <p><i>Follow up question</i> depending upon how they answer the question: Why did you decide on special education over general education?</p> <p>Tell me more about your typical day/week .</p> <p><i>Follow up question</i> depending upon how they answer question: What type of situations . at the end of the day - make you feel you have had %a good day+as a teacher?</p> <p>What instructional materials do you use in your classroom? How were these materials selected?</p> <p>What diagnostic tools do you use in your classroom? (Diagnostics)</p> <p>Which statewide, standardized tests did your students participate in last year (and/or the year before?) Which tests? (CMA / CST / English / Math)?</p> <p>How, if at all, and when were the test results made available to you?</p> <p>How did your students perform on these</p>	<p>N/A</p>
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	tests?	
<b>Goals</b>	<p>How closely aligned are your goals for your students with the state and district goals? (meaningful)</p> <p>How do you reconcile district and state demands with your students needs? (Goal Integrity)</p> <p>How closely does your school and district leadership monitor the progress of the special education students in your classes? (Data Use)</p> <p>How well do you think state tests capture your students academic performance and measure their progress?</p>	<p>If you could design an accountability system for special education students, what would look like?</p> <p>How do you reconcile the reality of data (state test results) with the individual and group (social and academic) behaviors of your students and the progress (or lack of progress) you observe your students making?</p> <p>Have high-stakes accountability and new performance measures changed the way you set goals for your students in a way you are comfortable with?</p>
<b>Values</b>	<p>How do you decide what is important for your students to learn? (Focus)</p> <p>How important is it to you that your students meet the targets set by the state?</p> <p>To what extent do you and your colleagues in special education share common values and beliefs about the new performance measures?</p>	<p>How realistic do you consider the new performance expectations for your students?</p> <p>We know that student achievement is a result of a wide range of factors, yet the state holds teachers and schools almost solely accountable for their students achievement. What non-school factors do you see as contributing to the academic progress of your students?</p> <p>Do you think it is fair for the state to hold teachers accountable for student progress?</p>



		<p>The new accountability systems also hold special education teachers to the same standards as teachers who teach non-disabled students . what is your opinion about this?</p> <p>If you had your way, what would good teaching in special education look like? What would good assessment look like?</p> <p>What would a fair accountability system look like for students with disabilities?</p> <p>How would you balance varied studentsqneeds and the ethic of caring that is special educationsqhallmark, with the need for an accountability system?</p> <p>Historically, there have been gapping disparities between the achievement of students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. How do you perceive this?</p>
<p><b>Capacities</b></p>	<p>What skills and knowledge do you think special education teachers need to help their students meet the state and district's performance expectations? (Efficacy)</p> <p>Do you feel you possess these skills?</p> <p>To what extent do you and your colleagues collaborate on issues of student performance?</p> <p>What role does the use of data play in</p>	<p>If you had all the necessary resources at your disposal and pushed your students as hard as you possibly could to meet the new performance measures, what is the likelihood that they would do so?</p> <p>What do lunch room conversations sound like when you listen to your colleagues discuss high.</p>

	<p>these collaborations? (How useful?)</p> <p>To what extent do you and your colleagues in special education agree about what students with disabilities should know (and be able to do)? Can you give some examples?</p> <p>How does the performance of your students on standardized tests affect your sense of success as an effective educator?</p> <p>What, if any, professional development opportunities has been offered (or additional resources) that focus on the new accountability demands and children with disabilities to assist special education teachers with acquiring new skills? What would you like to see done differently?</p> <p>If you made a <i>wish list</i> and had unlimited access to money and resources, what resources would you <del>order</del> and which conditions would you change to support the students in your classes?</p> <p>How often and in what form does your district and building leadership make student achievement data available to you? (Data Use)</p> <p>Can you describe any changes you (and/or your colleagues) have noticed in the attitude of district/school leadership towards special education teachers since the new performance demands identify students with disabilities as a key sub group targeted for improved performance? How would you compare these messages with your past experiences? (Fairness)</p>	<p>stakes accountability systems?</p> <p>What is the true motivation and authentic concern . on the part of the building principal and district leaders - for the progress students in your classes make?</p> <p>If high-stakes accountability systems were to disappear tomorrow, how do you suppose this would affect the attitudes of building principals and district leaders towards the progress of students in your classes? (What would you replace it with?)</p>
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## APPENDIX C

### Observation Protocol

Time:

Date:

Place:

Observation of:

Purpose: Observation #

Teacher:

Range of Instructional Behaviors	Observed	Not Observed
1. Works one-to-one with students frequently		
2. %Whole group+pedagogical approach dominant		
3. Instruction materials prescriptive vs. teacher selected		
4. Instructional materials - uniform for whole class vs. differentiated to meet range of diverse needs		
5. Checks frequently for each student's understanding (individualized attention)		
6. Paces lesson to ensure student's understanding		
7. Paces lesson with intent to cover material		
8. Classroom (physical) set up promotes individualization		
9. Teacher comments reflect caring, patience and respect		
10. Classroom climate %personalized+, comfortable		
11. Teacher comments and tone positive, patient, supportive		
12. Teacher demonstrates active attempt to meet various student needs; employs a variety of instructional approaches and strategies		
13. Instructional activity focus is test taking strategies		
14. Student groupings reflect individualization of instruction		
15. Lessons designed to capture student attention . careful lesson planning in evidence		

<b>Observation # 1</b>	
<i>Observation Notes Descriptive Notes</i>	<i>Reflective Notes</i>

## APPENDIX D

### Preliminary Suggestions for Coding the Data

#### **Goals/Rewards**

Response to questions reflects teacher is primarily extrinsically motivated (EM . R+), i.e., works without ambivalence towards clearly set goals

Response to questions reflects teacher is primarily extrinsically motivated (EM . R-), works with ambivalence towards set goals, perhaps to maintain professional standing and/or avoid negative sanctions

Response to questions reflects teacher is primarily intrinsically motivated (IM - R), i.e., works mainly towards and for the good of the students+

Classroom behaviors/practice reflects teacher is motivated primarily by extrinsic factors (EM -B)

Classroom behaviors/practice reflects teacher is motivated primarily by intrinsic factors (IM - B)

Teacher has modified/changes instructional strategies (PRACTICE) in response to accountability demands (CP)

Teacher has not modified/changes instructional strategies (PRACTICE) in response to accountability demands (NCP)

#### **Values:**

Teacher considers accountability demands important (DI) and meaningful

Teacher considers accountability demands unimportant (DU) without meaning

Teacher considers accountability demands unimportant/unrealistic but tries to comply (DUC)

Teacher considers accountability demands unimportant/unrealistic and does not try to comply (DUNC)

Teacher considers accountability demands good, fair (DF-S) and realistic for students

Teacher considers accountability demands good and fair (DF-NS) but not sure if they are realistic

Teacher considers accountability demands unfair and unrealistic for students (DUF-S)

#### **Capacities:**

##### **Self – Efficacy:**

Teacher believes he/she has the capacity to push children to *achieve* the new goals (TC)

Teacher does not believe he/she has the capacity to push children to *achieve* the new goals (TNC)

***Expectations:***

Teacher believes students have the capacity to *achieve the new goals* (SC)

Teacher doesn't believe students have the capacity to *achieve the new goals* (SC)

***Contextual Support:***

Teachers believe school conditions are sufficient to support their efforts of helping students achieve accountability goals (SSC)

Teachers do not believe school conditions are strong enough support their efforts to have students achieve accountability goals (NSSC)

## APPENDIX D1

### Actual Coding of Data (Collapsed Coding Round 2)

**Perceptions:**

Program Capacity=PC  
Leadership Support =PS

**Values:**

Teacher Expectations=TE  
Teaches to the Test=TT

**Goals=G**

Externally Motivated=EM  
Internally Motivated=IM

Questions Fairness of Accountability System = FQ  
Questions Meaningfulness of Accountability System = MQ

Responds with Ambivalence = +A+; A-  
Awareness of Changes in Performance Measures = U+; U-

Code	Participant	Text	Notes

## APPENDIX E:

### Conceptual Matrix for Research Questions

Study Participants	Awareness of New Performance Measures	Expectations of Success	Values Under Accountability	Goals Under Accountability	Realism of Demands	Fairness of Demands
L1						
L2						
F1						
F2						
F3						
GHS1						
GHS2						

### Teacher Perceptions & Beliefs

Participant	Awareness Of New Performance Measures	Values Under Accountability	Expectations for Success	Goals Under Accountability	Attitude & Beliefs	Perceptions of Capacity: School Resources Leadership, Materials, Colleagues
Awareness of Accountability						
Fairness of Demands						
Realism of Demands						
Student Ability						
Response to Pressure						