High-stakes Accountability, Narrowing the Achievement Gap, and Special Education Teachers: Facing a Dilemma with Integrity

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. A fundamental assumption behind the law was that a system of standardized testing, proficiency goal setting for demographic student subgroups, and sanctions would motivate teachers to focus on students whose performance has heretofore lagged. Students with disabilities became one such subgroup. Under NCLB, special education teachers faced a novel pressure: to radically narrow the achievement gap between their students with disabilities towards proficiency or incur sanctions and corrective action for their schools and districts.

This in-depth multiple case study examines how this system impacted a small number of special education teachers. Although the mechanisms and underlying concepts for understanding teacher responses to accountability may be the same for both general education and special education, the strain on special education teachers could be expected to be more pronounced given the wide gap that often separates their students from the demanded norm. The study uses the concept of “integrity” to analyze public service workers’ agency in situations of strain or crisis. Integrity consists of four overlapping domains of judgment: obligations of office, personal integrity, client needs, and prudence. The concept postulates that educators may craft cognitive coherence and moral rightfulness in the tension between accountability obligations, teachers’ professional values, perceptions of students’ learning needs and a dose prudent survival tactics.

Across the spectrum of four contrasting cases, the study found that the special education teachers faced a true dilemma. Teachers adopted contradictory solutions -- some embraced the new demands, some rejected them. Both seemed equally untenable. A problem that cannot be solved turns into a dilemma that must be coped with. The study reveals salient dimensions of this dilemma: how teachers related to the external moral obligation to equalize, what they chose to ‘see’ when they viewed the achievement gap; how they explained, or explained away, their agency in narrowing the gap; how they muddled through with instructional maneuvers to make the gap go away; and what they regarded, and guarded, as fields of professional responsibility and autonomous decision making.
The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 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 assessments, and schools were required to include the results in annual state accountability reports. Students with disabilities 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.

The logic behind NCLB and the mandate to include students with disabilities was higher teacher expectations would lead to “increased access to the curriculum, increased participation in the state assessment system, and higher individual student achievement levels” (Defur, 2002, p. 204). The literature on educational accountability (Mintrop and Sunderman, 2009), however, tells a vastly different story. It is safe to assume that the lived experiences of special education teachers in response to NCLB are far more complicated than the facile theory of action undergirding NCLB seemed to suggest.

The study on which this paper reports explores the quandary special education teachers found themselves in as a result of the new and sweeping NCLB accountability demands. 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 prescribed in students’ Individual Education Plan, IEP, (Gartin and Murdick, 2005; McLaughlin and Rhim, 2007). Some special education students did participate in statewide testing prior to NCLB, but participation in large-scale assessments was a decision made by the student’s IEP team, and participation rates were low (Koretz and Barton, 2004). Special education teachers considered themselves successful and
competent 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).

Now, with NCLB, all but the most severely disabled students were 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 was mandated (Vannest, Mahadevan, Mason and Temple-Harvey, 2008). The NCLB sanctions regime further complicated matters because the assessment results of the ‘children with disabilities’ subgroup could now affect the standing of the entire school. Many schools and districts entered stages of corrective action because of missing their targets for special education students (Kim and Sunderman, 2005). For some scholars, NCLB’s sweeping requirements would result in students with disabilities benefitting from high standards and access to the general education curriculum (Thurlow and Johnson, 2000). Others feared that the high standards were inappropriate and the consequences unfair, and that undifferentiated and narrowly defined educational outcomes would do a disservice to student populations traditionally disenfranchised (Monroe, 2002; Kohn, 2001; Defur, 2002).

Accountability systems of the NCLB type that operate with standardized tests, simple performance targets (i.e. proficiency), and sanctions inherently create tensions between standardization and differentiation, especially for schools and teachers whose job it is to educate students ‘below standard,’ that is, all those students for whom the system’s proficiency targets are a great stretch. Strains are compounded for teachers in special education, a field in which the gaps between system expectations and actual student performance can be especially wide and in
which occupational traditions of differentiation rub uneasily against the system’s push for standard and equal treatment (McLaughlin, 2000). The purpose of the study is to explore this tension through in-depth case studies of a number of special education teachers working in varied organizational contexts, but all laboring under their state’s NCLB-aligned accountability system.

**Conceptual Framework**

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 students with disabilities, there is very little research on the effects of these systems on their teachers. In an early, pre-NCLB, longitudinal study looking at the impact of state accountability on students with disabilities in inclusive classroom settings, M. McLaughlin found that the new performance standards “created a sense of urgency and various degrees of frustration among teachers about how to accomplish this difficult task” (McLaughlin, 2000, p. 25). The Educational Policy Reform Institute (EPRI) explored 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 picture. Responses were both positive and negative, ranging from the belief that opportunities to learn and academic performance of students with disabilities had improved, but also that students would not be able to meet the standards despite the efforts of schools and teachers, the implication being that schools with high numbers of students with disabilities would risk identification as ‘failing schools’ (Nagle, Yunker and Malmagren, 2006).

The literature on general education teachers, working in low-SES schools and encountering accountability pressures, documents a similar disagreement. We have accounts of
turn-around and distortions (Anagnostopoulos, 2006; Au, 2007; Booher-Jennings, 2005; McNeil, 2000; Mintrop, 2004; Skrla & Scheurich, 2003; Reyes, Scribner, & Scribner, 1999). Given this wide spectrum of responses across studies, it stands to reason that non-systemic factors, beliefs and commitments that develop outside of the logic of the system, substantially influence whether the accountability system produces educationally desirable effects, and distortions are avoided.

High stakes accountability systems of the NCLB type, designed with the expressed purpose of equalizing outcomes, may make accountability systems irrefutable for schools and school districts, but competing beliefs, convictions, and professional traditions and the encompassing struggle to engage students in learning, regardless of official goals and preferences, simply do not go away. Quite the opposite, resistant realities of children’s cognitive and emotional needs, enduring value traditions, and claims to professional autonomy and agency may create dissonances between accountability obligations, teachers’ professional values, and student needs.

How these dissonances are conceived will largely depend on the occupational culture in which teachers, and especially special education teachers, carry out their work. The literature on special education as a distinct workplace is sparse. Artiles (2003) points out that 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 approved teacher credentialing programs require two full years of graduate studies that include a period of student teaching apprenticeship. The common workplace structure and extensive training of special education teachers lay the groundwork for the occupational culture of special education. Shared cognitions, attitudes, norms, and values form in the process that may become taken for granted assumptions about performance expectations, responsibilities, the nature of ones’ clients,
or the appropriate repertoire of strategies for the task at hand (Schein, 2004). The taken for

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 “enhance(d) 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. Questionable practices, such as “vague disability criteria, ongoing segregation
from general education, adoption of ineffective interventions and poor student outcomes”
(Sullivan, 2010, p. 4), makes the adequacy of differentiating students with disabilities in separate
special education tracks a dubious project.

“Special education has historically faced the dilemma of affirming or ignoring
difference” (Artiles, 2003, p.193). On the one hand, accepting the state’s accountability demands
as worthy and realistic goals and pushing students with disabilities towards grade level norms
may denote preparing children with disabilities for life in a competitive world. On the other
hand, accepting the new accountability measures may imply a denial of real differences and
respect for children with differences. Similar to general education, value conflicts between
efficiency, equality, child-centredness, and professional autonomy may abound (Kliebard, 1987).
Elsewhere, the second author of this paper has developed the concept of integrity to capture how
educators cope with these quandaries under pressure of accountability (XXX, 2012). In a
nutshell, common sense notions of integrity conjure honesty, sticking to one’s principles,
courage in the face of challenges, and wholeness in the face of fragmentation, conflict, or
fragility. We say that educators as individuals or collectives have integrity when they: (1) strive for agency in pursuit of valued internal purposes, (2) establish coherence or consistency among values, word, and deed, (3) acknowledge compromise, rupture, and conflict with honesty and truthfulness; (4) evaluate action in light of perceived client needs; and (5) address institutional role obligations in the face of multiple values and moral demands of the institution.

The concept of integrity has a moral and psychological dimension. A person with integrity affirms their core values and commitments within a normative frame while integrating, giving unity, coherence, or identity, to the manifold and conflicting demands placed on the self (McFall, 1987; Ramsay, 1997). Morally, integrity is about developing a sense of right and wrong, discerning a course of action, and avowing to stay true to principles even when the environment does not reward the conduct (Carter, 1996; McFall, 1987). Integrity always involves risk and potential rupture or disharmony between the self and their social environment. Psychologically, integrity is about a sense of self-worth rather than clear normative standards. Steele (1988) defines integrity as a sense of adaptive adequacy in the face of environmental forces that threaten individuals’ sense of self-worth, for example as a result of negative judgments, sanctions, and the like. Integrity is restored with images that affirm “the larger self” (Steele, 1988). These images may not necessarily address the specific situation, nor may they be able to actually resolve the material threat. In fact, individuals may “tolerate specific inconsistencies with no attempt at resolution,” (p. 268) as long as a broad balance, a workable whole is maintained.

Because educators in their work settings act out a public role in a public office that is defined by institutional task structures and values, we are not only concerned with personal integrity, but also with public integrity. Expanding on Dobel (1999), public integrity for school
administrators and teachers consists of four overlapping domains of judgment: obligations of office, personal integrity, client needs, and prudence. Obligations of office do not inhere blind obedience or abdication of personal responsibility, rather it requires careful weighing of the purposes and consequences of an institutional structure, program, or policy in light of one’s own commitments and in light of what one perceives as ones’ clients needs. Officials are in their offices, principals in their schools, and teachers in their classrooms, in order to achieve results. Given the increasingly impersonal, disintegrative, and amoral functioning of much of modern institutional life, integrity in the public realm needs to be augmented by prudence, the practical wisdom, skill, and forethought to marshal the forces and means needed to accomplish outcomes. Prudence is distinguished from expediency. For the latter, any means are welcome that produce effects in the moment; for the former, the choice of means, with sometimes needed ethical compromises, is oriented towards the longer term and with an outlook on a broader picture. Integrity is shot through with pragmatic but prudent politicking, managing, and strategizing (Honig & Hatch, 2004).

**Figure 1   Integrity Force Field**
Using the concept of integrity as central to this study, we assume that new, bold, and high pressure accountability demands pose a situation fraught with value conflicts and difficult strategic choices for Special Education teachers that they must cope with to feel cognitively consistent and morally whole in their daily work. To achieve integrity, they may activate interpretations of accountability obligations, especially with respect to equity and realism. They may activate perceptions of student needs, especially with respect to explanations of the gap and the strategies to narrow it. They may order value hierarchies, commitments, and responsibilities as professionals, especially with respect to child-centered or system-centered values. And they may finally fashion a sense of agency in day to day work by crafting a coherent story from these system interpretations, client perceptions, and value orderings in selective ways and shot through with prudence and compromise.

**Methods and Data**

Given the development of the field, the study needed to be exploratory. It consists of seven in-depth case studies of individual special education teachers who worked in varied organizational contexts. A multiple case study design increases the confidence to findings (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Special education teachers who taught students with Mild to Moderate Disabilities were recruited. Teachers teaching these students are representative of the majority of special education teachers. In addition, in the state of California, students with Mild to Moderate Disabilities were mostly included under the state’s California Standards Test (CST) or a modified version of this test, while students with more severe disabilities were not.

The seven teachers worked in two different districts. In District A, the study was conducted with three teachers at two schools, in District B with four teachers in three schools. Both districts are located in the state of California. Both districts’ special education subgroup
The population was about 10 percent, numerically significant at the secondary and district levels. The schools differed with respect to ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. Three of the schools were located in stable middle class settings, two faced more challenges due to diversity and poverty. All schools were well-functioning. Some schools had met their NCLB performance targets overall, others missed subgroup targets, and some schools and one district missed their performance targets for special education students while the study was underway. The relevance of these contextual conditions will become clearer in the case studies.

The first author collected most of the data. She introduced herself as a fellow special education practitioner and a person with a disability herself (see below). Repeated in-depth interviews and multiple direct observations opened a window into the lived experiences of special education teachers under high-stakes accountability systems (Creswell, 2007), beyond the surface of espoused beliefs and values (Schein, 2004). Interviews varied from open to semi-structured and from formal to informal (Creswell, 2007). Participants were engaged in three data collection cycles comprised of an initial interview, an observation, the nature and focus of which emerged from discussions during the initial interview, and a post-conference after observation. Questions for the post-observation interviews rested largely on the data gathered during observations. Observations aimed at (1) understanding how teachers operationalize their espoused beliefs and values; (2) seeing if expressed beliefs were aligned with or discrepant from observed behaviors; (3) gathering data that corroborates or contradicts information collected during interviews, and (4) generating interviews questions for the subsequent cycle. All in all, 21 initial interviews, 21 observations, and 21 follow-up interviews were conducted during three data collection cycles.

---

inquiry cycles, augmented by a number of informal contacts. In some cases, the initial interview protocol of the next cycle was collapsed with the follow-up interview of the previous cycle.

The conceptual framework for this study guided the data analysis, leading to multiple steps in the analysis. A list of initial descriptive codes and codes tied to the conceptual framework was developed. In addition, codes emerged from the data that helped in developing a thick, descriptive, within-case analysis for each case (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007) and then in comparing the cases. Data analysis was facilitated by NVivo software.

Zane, the first author collecting most of the data, is a Hard of Hearing/Deaf woman. During the one-on-one interviews, Zane, who is a successful lip reader can, in quiet settings, fully participate in and understand conversations. In addition, interviews and conversations were tape recorded later transcribed. For the classroom observations, Zane was accompanied by professional note takers to record and interpret teacher conversations, dialogue and interactions.

As a researcher and practitioner in special education, Zane had to be highly aware of her own biases. To avoid bias and insure rigor, colleagues and researchers provided consistent and critical friend feedback throughout the data analysis, interpretation and writing process. Perpetual peer review of notes and report drafts during biweekly meetings with critical friends also served to reduce bias, identify inconsistencies in data analysis and insure the accuracy of interpretations and findings. 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.

Findings
After a brief overview over the seven cases, we delve into the analysis of four cases that together reveal the main contrasting patterns in crafting integrity. The other three cases do not substantially add to this picture and are therefore dropped from consideration in this paper.

**Table xx: Characteristics of study participants by years teaching and type of classroom**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Number of Years</th>
<th>Classroom Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>5-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stella</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flo</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sami</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerry</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since high-stakes accountability systems had been in place for roughly ten years in the state at the time of the study, there was 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 ever knew” for the newer teachers.

In the following section, we present four of the seven cases. Each case opens with a brief introduction and the context for teaching. We then examine how study participants related to accountability goals, perceived the achievement gap and how to narrow it, and formulated their own professional expectations and responsibilities. Throughout each case study, data gathered from interviews are supported by evidence culled from classroom observations.

**Stella**

Stella was a veteran special education teacher in District B. 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. Having taught for more than twenty years, Stella’s main professional socialization took place long before high-stakes accountability
measures were put in place. If the hallmark of a good special education teacher is strong compassion for students who learn differently than those in the mainstream, Stella exuded warmth, thoughtfulness and support extended to her students during classroom observations. There was no down time for Stella when students were present (Stella, Obs. 3/18/2011; Obs. 4/20/2011). She created a safe, upbeat environment for learning by peppering dialogue with encouraging comments and positive reinforcement:

Good! I like that people are looking back for the answer, good job …. 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 … 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 … 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 … (Stella, Obs. April 20, 2011).

In Stella’s classroom, 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 most of Stella’s students also functioned below their grade level, she often used a good deal of her materials off-level, such as 6th or 7th grade textbooks with 8th 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 too much importance on the CMA because it was too difficult for most 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 [the material]” (Stella, Int. Feb 28, 2011). A great deal of Stella’s information on student progress came from checking for understanding during classroom instruction. During classroom visits, Stella was observed checking on students’ progress constantly and noting it on her own charts: “I am all with checking, checking, checking for understanding and they do work that shows and I get it” (Int. February 28, 2011).

Accountability Demands

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:

They look at them [the scores]. I mean it’s part of it for sure, because now that they have the subgroups, and then like, what is it, the significant numbers. And so now special ed is one of those groups that you have to bring up. So the state is looking at those … 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 … (Stella, Int. February 28, 2011).
Being used to be on the margins and largely left alone by the administration, 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). 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.”

Perception of the Gap and How to Narrow It

The push for standardized instruction presented a challenge to Stella because most 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 (Stella, Int. March 31, 2011). Stella’s professional socialization had taken place long before the advent of high-stakes accountability systems and the IEP was a heart piece of her goal setting. Yet, the push for special education teachers to improve test scores meant Stella would have to embrace general education standards. She resisted the idea:

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).

Most of Stella’s students, she stated, struggled with reading, writing and math. She focused on doing whatever it took to help her students with mastering basic skills: “So the standards, yeah, they are important … But if they never learn to read, they are stuck, so it’s the basics for me” (Stella, Int. February 28, 2011). Stella said that she designed her instruction 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).

Faced with the pressure to teach to the standards, Stella operated with stealth and selectivity. She would teach to the standards and to the IEP goals:

And it [an IEP 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 whatever I write down on the IEP, I am doing that in the class. (Stella, Int. Feb. 28, 2011).

Despite her insistence on setting individual student goals, Stella was acutely aware of the achievement gap. Indeed, Stella was observed putting considerable effort into bridging 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, although her students could not read grade level text, she wanted to be sure they had access to grade level concepts (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 even read the modified textbook. 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 met students’ needs, i.e., on their terms: “If they are in 6th grade we don’t really do
third grade work with them. We still want them doing 6th or 7th even if the reading level is lower” (Stella, 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. In response to the administration’s messages about changes in performance expectations, Stella knew that some of her colleagues were now 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).

Professional Responsibility

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. She presented a blunt assessment of the impact learning disabilities can have on student achievement:

The truth is they have learning disabilities. They can't help it, and that’s why they are in here …So… I really think also that we can't pity them and say ‘oh, poor you, you can't learn.’ I 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 limiting her students. One instance surfaced after an observation of a social studies class. Stella
had been explaining the concept of westward expansion: “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’re going to get it. Then I ask or I’ll ask them a question and the answer is, I’m like wow, they missed it completely” (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 them because she considered them inappropriate for her students:

They just bomb it. They can’t do it. And they – they’ll 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. She insisted on having precise knowledge of the students’ cognitive and emotional needs and using a broad instructional repertoire to meet those needs. This knowledge also bounded her sense of
responsibility: grade level standards ran up against the reality that learning disabilities were a biological fact.

Towards the end of the study, after the new state test results had come out, Stella related that the district was in Program Improvement. As Stella realized that her life would change, she addressed the pressures of high-stakes accountability with a directness that was not perceptible before. Although she tried to infuse the situation with her usual optimism, frustration was palpable:

… But, I think it is like that 2014 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 … Kids end up in special day class for a reason. (Stella, Int. April 28, 2011)

There were two things that bothered her. One was that disabled students would end up feeling the brunt of the pressure: “You can’t put pressure on these guys. […] 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). The other was concern for her autonomy. As a long time special education practitioner, she felt that she was the expert who knew her students best. She approvingly stated earlier: “As special education teachers we have so much
freedom.” (Stella, Int. April 28, 2011). But this freedom she feared might go away, much to the detriment of students. Of this she was certain.

**Integrity**

In facing the accountability dilemma in special education, Stella crafted cognitive consistency and moral wholesomeness in several ways. She insisted on her professional status as the expert, yet prudently made allowances to expectations that she teach at grade level. She conceded that more pressure would mean more external intrusion and more compromise. She hoped that in the end the standards would have to be changed once the “2014 pipe dream” mark had been passed. A mixture of long experience, keen observation of student needs, and the belief that there were biological boundaries that talk about goals and expectations could not make go away made her feel right. Her professional 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 the *sine qua non*) and her commitment to authenticity (i.e. using only materials and instructional methods that could support her students’ progress exactly where they were) were characteristics of a teacher committed to doing what she thought best for her students. Stella was a teacher who did not concern herself with covering the tested materials, yet explored with technical precision and detailed record keeping what instructional strategies might enable her students to go as far as she felt they might be able to go.

**Sami**

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 had 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 up herself or had gathered over the years (Sami, Int. February 22, 2011). Sami followed the district’s benchmark system and used regular curriculum based tests and student portfolios to measure student progress.

The students in Sami’s classes presented her 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 regular state test, others took the modified version, many took a combination of both versions. For some, she saw testing as inappropriate:

Just the fact that they are in a testing situation for a 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……, they’re nowhere on that. (Sami, Int. April 8, 2011).

Sami was 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. Her classroom could have been an emblem of 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 we will start chapter 9 today…..and [student] class is up here! Thank you …

(Sami, Obs. March 17, 2011).

Accountability Demands

Sami’s responses to accountability pressures were quite similar to Stella’s in some respects and different in others. As an experienced educator at her school with a strong standing, she regarded herself as an expert, and it is from this position that she felt free to be critical of the system. When her principal reviewed student scores with the whole faculty, among them the scores of the special education subgroup, she did not feel singled out. Some of her students had done well on the state test, and she knew that a certain amount of the tested material would have to be covered in order to achieve that success (Sami, Int. February 22, 2012). Given the mixed profile of her clientele, she did feel responsible to adhere to the content of the state standards.

Perception of the Gap and How to Narrow It
“That Asperger’s kid is probably brighter and more capable than any regular ed kid” (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. For other students in her class, Sami designed a modified curriculum near grade level, while for still others, her goals centered on mastering basic skills. Given the wide spectrum of students Sami taught, her perception of ‘gaps’ varied. Her challenge was to integrate her students’ multiple and varied needs into her curriculum. During a classroom observation in May (Obs. May 17, 2011), 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. The goal for the lesson, she stated, was having her students 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). But she expressed puzzlement:

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).

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. I mean, it is just kind of a big contradiction to me. I do not understand it. (Sami, Int. Feb 22, 2011).

When asked how she reconciled this apparent contradiction she responded: “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.” (Sami, Int. Feb, 22, 2011).
Sami, like Stella, had confidence in her expertise, keen understanding of her students’ individual needs, and instructional practices honed through long experience. But unlike Stella, she organized her work more strongly in reference to grade level standards and the need to narrow the gap by adhering to the general education curriculum. Her stance was not principled. She “just kind of did what she did.” She had found what worked in muddling through her “not understanding.”

Professional Responsibility

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 her own standards:

… 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 narrowing the achievement gap for students with disabilities, but this possibility was based on the characteristics of individuals. It was not programmatic:

I think the achievement gap is, we can close it to an extent for a student with disabilities depending on the level of … I have students in resource who, 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).

Not unlike Stella, she paired long experience, expertise, and an elaborate repertoire of instructional strategies with the belief that learning disabilities were placing a biological limitation on student achievement:

Well, it’s because of the nature of what we’re dealing with. .. 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 … I think they [the state] are not looking at the whole picture … So the state is putting on blinders 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).

Over the months of the study, accountability pressures were mounting in her district, but the messages reached special education teachers obliquely. There was little discussion about goals or test scores per se, but district administrators had adopted a new program for special education that they wanted implemented right away, mid-year. For Sami, this was irresponsible: “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….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… “ (Sami, Int. April 2011). In Sami’s eyes, the decision was poorly planned and detrimental to her students’ learning process: “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” (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 some of Sami’s colleagues complied with the district, no one appeared to challenge her decision. She was willing to accept the new program, but on her own terms. She dug in, but was also resigned:

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

Integrity

Sami crafted cognitive consistency and moral wholeness in ways that were similar and different from the previous case. Like Stella, Sami insisted on her professional status as the expert. Given the range of students with disabilities that she was serving, grade level standards and state tests played a larger role in her work. Like Stella, she paired keen observation of her students’ individual learning needs and a broad instructional repertoire of meeting those needs with the certainty that there were biological limits that she as a teacher, laboring under the pressures of a standardizing accountability system, could not easily overcome despite her strongest wishes. Sami did not take a principled stance in understanding her dilemma. She just did what she did, implementing an instructional program that she had built up through trial and error. Only when the district demanded to dismantle her workable program and replace it wholesale with a prescriptive alternative did she balk. She did not resist, she did not try to save
her approach. She simply insisted on a reprieve for a semester so that her students’ learning trajectories would not be disrupted. She reserved that little resistance to herself, took the risk, and got away with it, prudently banking on the traditional position of special education on the margins of administrators’ attention.

Jerry

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 in the same district as Sami. 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 to become 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) despite his academic troubles. Motivated by this 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.

As a resource teacher, Jerry worked closely with the general education teachers who taught the classes where his students were mainstreamed. For assessment purposes and gauging the progress of his students through the curriculum on a daily and weekly basis, Jerry used materials drawn from the grade-level curriculum, teacher made tests, and information culled from his students’ performance on practice assessments that he downloaded from the state department website. 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: “I use a lot of, a lot of stuff from the [state department of education] websites like the … released stuff …..We want to get as close ….as possible. (Jerry, Int. November 1, 2011). 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. He found, “it’s easy to align those [standards] with your IEPs … (Jerry, Int. November 1, 2011).

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 motivating his students. During one
observation, 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. At one point he asked the speaker to share any regrets he might have had, to which he responded, “Not trying” [in school]. (Obs. Jerry, November 15, 2011).

**Accountability Demands**

District B had just entered Program Improvement under NCLB when data collection with Jerry took place. 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 embraced accountability pressure as a vehicle for initiating positive changes in the special education program. What for district administrators may have been a concern for test scores not improving, for him it was the excitement of “an additional option for service” (Jerry, Int. November 1, 2011). He was in full support of the district’s new initiative in breaking down barriers between special and general education by creating co-teaching set-ups in regular classrooms that would reduce the amount of time students received services in the resource classroom, but would increase their exposure to grade level content (Jerry, Int. November 22, 2011). Excited by the prospect of change, Jerry’s status as a relatively new teacher - and his active embrace of the new system demands as opportunities to equalize gave him a very different perspective than that of Stella and Sami.

**Perception of the Gap and How to Narrow It**

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).

In a conversation, following an observation of an algebra lesson in his resource room, Jerry explained how he managed to use mostly grade level materials and still would meet students’ individual learning needs. His students were mainstreamed into a general education algebra class and they were expected to take grade level math, “… whether they were ready for it or not” (Jerry, Int. November 22, 2011). Jerry saw his job as remediating specific weaknesses that the students had in following the regular curriculum: “My job [is] to try and get them from where they are to passing that class” (Jerry, Int. November 22, 2011). 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:

In Algebra let’s say I have a student who… they cannot add, subtract, multiply or divide fractions. Well … I wouldn’t hold that kid back and make them do fraction review for the whole year. Maybe by giving them some curriculum that may challenge them like, solving 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 … (Jerry, Int. November 1, 2011.).

He conceded, however, that in reading he sometimes used off-level resources to meet student needs: “Reading is the only area where I think that’s where I go in terms of lower level curriculum.” (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.

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 improvement. Jerry described his thinking
this way: “I get excited. They [other teachers] will bring them – they’ll give them the pre-
algebra stuff but because they are so weak with fractions. ….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).

Centrally, Jerry 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). He wanted “ students start to become
motivated in their own ability to learn.” (Jerry, Int. November 22, 2011). But he was less certain
when challenged to connect his idea of motivating students via goal setting 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, 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. (Jerry, Int. November 22, 2011).

Yet, the absence of these instructional resources could be overcome by determination:

“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” (Jerry, Int. November 22, 2011.)

Professional Responsibility

Unlike Stella and Sami, Jerry did not engage in any thoughts about the limiting conditions of disability. Instead, he saw the limits in the special education programs which he saw as reflective of a “deficit model.” 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. (Jerry, Int. November 22, 2011)

In Jerry’s’ view, accountability pressures directly connected to the responsibility of educators to equalize opportunities for students with disabilities. External pressure bolstered, or empowered, his sense of professionalism, but with a distinct managerial orientation. He was encouraged by his administrators to become an agent of change, and he embraced his role, but suffered set-backs:

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

Interviews with other special education teachers in Jerry’s school revealed that, in spite of Jerry’s idealism and enthusiasm for program innovation, his level of skill and expertise was not seen as commensurate with the power that he had been granted by the administration (Catherine, Int. November 7, 2011). He on the other hand tried to understand his colleagues’ skepticism in terms of a generation gap: “You’re asking to change the whole, everything they’ve ever done their whole lives” (Jerry, Int. November 22, 2011). But at a deeper level, his approach to change, consistent with his belief in the power of goal setting and accountability, ran counter to occupational traditions in public schools and would have seemed odd to the likes of Stella or Sami:

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).

_Integrity_
In facing the accountability dilemma in special education, Jerry crafted cognitive consistency and moral wholeness in ways radically different from the previous two cases. A young, passionate and relatively new teacher, Jerry was a member of the new generation of teachers born into high-states accountability. He embraced the new accountability demands with enthusiasm, considering them as good and just for his students and a marker of assuming responsibility for urgent change. The gap between his students’ actual cognitive performance and the high goals of the system disappeared in his mind when he focused on the power of motivation and expectation. Technical aspects of bridging the gap with instructional strategies faded into the background. Not unlike his pedagogy, his idea of changing professional practice is decidedly managerialist. It flows from goal setting, expectations, and directions from the top that are to generate enthusiasm on the bottom.

Joe

Joe, a special education teacher in District A was cordial, relaxed and gregarious, when we met. 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. Joe’s classroom seemed small. 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 Sami’s and Jerry’s classes, Joe served a broad range of and skills and abilities: “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. But tests were not his emphasis.

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).

He considered the state tests, “just one more little bit of information about ‘Johnny’” (Joe, Int. February 23, 2011). 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 16, 2011).

Accountability Demands

While Joe said that he was aware of the accountability system and kept in mind the need to prepare his students for high school and passing the High School exit exam eventually (Joe, Int. April 6, 2011), he was not overly concerned about his students’ performance on state tests. 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 demands, like Sami. Rather, he looked at the tests pragmatically: “There are some uses, but it’s not enough to justify the testing I think” (Joe, Int. May 16, 2011). His main criticism of 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 …..As a teacher, those things are more interesting to me, the individuals” (Joe, Int. February 23, 2011).

*Perception of the Gap and How to Narrow It*

Joe followed a process similar to that of Stella and Sami when formulating student goals. He pulled student goals from a data bank of grade level content standards, and then “tweaked” them (Joe, Int. February 23, 2011) to match student’s ability levels and comfort. During one observation (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. The readability of the student magazine was well below the grade level of the students in the class. When asked about this wide gap, he said: “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. His teaching philosophy was low key, pragmatic, if not relaxed:

> So the working teacher is 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 .. history [or] science….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. (Joe, Int. April 6, 2011).

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).

Such an attitude would not lead to overcome achievement gaps in a systematic or testable way, and Joe confirmed that that was not his moral guide:

To me, 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’m not going to close any gaps. I’m hopefully going to get them move along their skills to get closer to grade level. …..If they could handle the standards they wouldn’t be in special ed. (Joe, Int. April 6, 2011)

Rather he found guidance in himself:

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).

Professional Responsibility
More than any of the other teachers, Joe largely ignored external obligations and was the least troubled by them. He saw himself as the one setting the standard. He cared and yet he lacked the precision and preoccupation with which teachers like Stella or Sami pursued their craft. And he lacked the idealism that engrossed Jerry.

When we inquired about his instructional approaches at the beginning of the study, Joe said that he was learning to use a new reading program that he had just been given by the district the previous semester. 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 it several months later (Joe, Int. February 23, 2011). Then, more than half-way through the school year, he received yet 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. These kinds of compliance expectations could get teachers like Sami, working in the same district, resentful or resistant. But not Joe who was more accepting. Ever the pragmatist, he was willing to try the new program when others refused, if the district thought it might make a difference for his students. He was willing to give the program the benefit of the doubt. During a classroom observation, Joe was 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. Joe admitted that he was not familiar enough with how to implement the program to its full capacity (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 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 [why] I’m optimistic. (Joe, Int. April 6, 2011).

**Integrity**

In facing the accountability dilemma in special education, Joe, not unlike Stella, Sami, and Jerry, professed to care deeply about his students’ welfare. When he said that he “let his conscience be his guide” he was implying that he answered only to himself, a stance he had adopted many years before the advent of high-stakes accountability. He largely ignored the new external imperatives. His inner moral compass, however, did not extend to the myriad technical details involved in providing students with appropriate and fitting curriculum delivery that would maximize learning gains, the way we saw in the Stella and Sami cases. So it is perhaps not surprising that he, although rejecting the standards-based performance targets, was willing to accommodate the programmatic prescriptions that the district had generated to address these performance targets. When faced with a directive, Joe readily and pragmatically complied, justifying his compliance on the grounds that the new programs *might* make improvements. Prudence in this case extended to maintaining his calm and the space for the relational core of his pedagogy.

**Conclusion**

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 at 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 the research. Four contrasting cases were selected for this article. Three of the four selected teachers
were veteran, special education teachers, and one was a young, relatively new teacher. The four cases had in common that they expressed the attitudes and beliefs reflective of the kind of teachers that high-stakes accountability systems would have had to reach, in order for the system to work for special education. Variations across the four cases offered differences in generations, work context, and accountability pressures encountered.

We used to concept of integrity to order the ways educators cope with performance demands that potentially upset the traditional occupational culture in special education. Integrity is not something one possesses, but something that one strives for. “Where there is no possibility of its loss, integrity cannot exist” (McFall, 1987, p. 9). Integrity comes about when educators strike some sort of balance between four main poles: accountability obligations, personal values, perceived student needs, and prudence, a shot of concern for survival. The balance renders moral and psychological integration of the self. It rests on views of reality that are, or are made, consistent with an ordering of one’s values.

NCLB put forth the proposition that a majority of students with disabilities could and should be achieving at the same academic levels as their non-disabled peers. This call for standardizing something that appears to be exceptionally resistant to it epitomizes the discontinuity or dissonance between special education and general education. It 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 remedies tried by educators attenuate the problem in some respects, but leave much to be desired. Whether educators embrace or reject accountability demands, individualize or standardize, accept or rebel against
‘difference,’ the problem seems just as intractable. When contradictory solutions produce similarly desirable or undesirable outcomes, one faces a true dilemma (Cuban, 2001). A dilemma cannot be solved; it needs to be coped with. This is what the four cases are all about.

Each teacher in the study is unique in how he or she copes, but across the cases we found that there were a number of salient dimensions that structure their coping: the way teachers answer to the equalizing obligation of accountability; the way they perceive the gap between their students’ abilities and grade level norms, especially the way they explain, or explain away, the gap; the repertoire of instructional strategies, evident in classroom practice, that teachers develop to address the gap, the precision with which they keenly observe their students’ cognitive and emotional needs; and finally a sense of professional responsibility and claim to autonomy with respect to system pressures.

Table 1  Conceptual Meta-Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Acc. Obligation</th>
<th>Perception of gap</th>
<th>Explanation of gap</th>
<th>Instruction Emphasis</th>
<th>Observing stud. needs</th>
<th>Prof. Responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stella</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Precise</td>
<td>Protect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sami</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Precise</td>
<td>Protect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerry</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Program failure</td>
<td>Motivational</td>
<td>Fuzzy</td>
<td>Embrace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>SPED label</td>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>Fuzzy</td>
<td>Accommodate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is apparent from this matrix that the two senior female teachers draw from very similar ‘material’ when they craft their response to accountability. These teachers are centered on the instructional core. Perception of achievement gaps as wide, long experiences that their best efforts and desires could not trump what they interpret as the boundaries of biology, and a keen observation of student needs, especially in the cognitive realm, shape their rejection of the
equalizing obligation of accountability. These considerations also justify their duty as professionals to protect students from the system and resist undue programmatic requirements. By contrast, Jerry connects to a morality of equalization when he embraces accountability and he links this morality to the morality of failing professional practices and the managerial impetus of overhauling entrenched occupational traditions. It is interesting how this approach is facilitated by his view of the instructional core in his own classes. He privileges motivational and expectancy forces over keen observation of cognitive learning, and he deplores the absence of powerful instructional technology that he believes needs to be provided to him and his colleagues. Jerry’s view of the instructional challenge in special education is shaped by his own personal experiences that taught him the power of motivation and committed professional effort. But fading out the details of cognitive learning and instruction allows him to create consistency between accountability, professionalism and the instructional core where Stella and Sami could see only a gulf.

Lastly Joe. He at once rejects the accountability demands as unrealistic and accommodates the programmatic prescriptions that come his way as a result of these very accountability demands. He, more than any of the others, professes to rely on a personal moral compass unperturbed by external obligations. But the action space that this compass regulates expands or contracts pragmatically depending on administrators’ directives. It is not clear if Joe accommodates these directives because of a personal preference for being left in peace, because of a pedagogy that stresses relationships and reaching the whole child, or because of a view of professionalism that leaves core curricular issues out of the bounds of his responsibility. All three considerations seem to work hand in hand to create consistency and moral wholesness in the midst of apparent cognitive dissonance and programmatic disruption.
We believe that the concept of integrity has afforded us a powerful lens into the inner work life of special education teachers laboring under NCLB. The “2014 pipe dream” as Stella hoped and predicted has by now passed in its acuity in many states of the U.S., among them California. At the time of writing, we do not know if this is a mere reprieve or if policy makers will seriously rethink the goal setting and incentive functions for the accountability system designs of their states. The virulence of a sanctions regime that at its height declared more than half of California schools and districts in need of improvement, many of them due to failing subgroup goals for students with disabilities (Asimov 2007), has brought the dilemmas facing special education teachers into sharp relief. Special education is a field that is at once called to serve individual student needs and to overcome the power of low expectations. It is asked to create a safe space for students to learn and is criticized for being an exclusionary track that reinforces inequalities. In such a space, teachers are challenged to carry out their work with integrity. Integrity is not a high ethical standard, rather it is a continuous striving for consistency, self-worth, and moral order in a technically dissonant and morally ambiguous work environment that cannot be traversed without a dose of prudence.

The four teachers we followed over a period a many months accomplish integrity in many different ways. In each instance they found ways to make accountability demands, their experience of the instructional core, and professional values and responsibilities fit with each other. The reader may agree with one of these paths more than with another. Our role is not to judge but to document. We may underwrite the concern for technical instructional expertise on the part of the two senior female teachers, but we may shrink from the “biology” that borders their expectations. And then again, we may applaud that they resist undue disruptions of their carefully crafted instructional programs. We may adopt the strong motivational impetus of young
Jerry and may wish for the success of his reform effort, but we may be skeptical of his overreliance on inspiration and management that seemingly encourages fuzzy observation of student learning needs and devalues the accumulated wisdom of practice. Lastly we may embrace Joe’s humanity and flexibility in trying out new programs, but shrink away from his passive accommodationist stance towards student learning outcomes and from his feeble sense of responsibility in crafting his own instructional expertise to produce these outcomes.

In this paper, we explored personal ways of forging integrity. But for good practices to emerge we should imagine a collective dialogue among the varied voices (Benjamin, 1990) in which each of our protagonists, described here, would engage with the intent to strive for agency in pursuit of valued internal purposes, establish coherence or consistency among values, word, and deed, acknowledge compromise, rupture, and conflict with honesty and truthfulness, evaluate action in light of perceived client needs, and address external obligations in the face of multiple values and moral demands of the institution.
References


Benjamin, M. (1990). *Splitting the difference: compromise and integrity in ethics and politics.* University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, KS.


and Expanding Conceptualizations of Multicultural Education. *Race, Gender & Class*, 17 (1-2), pp. 93-109.
