TEACHER RESPONSE TO DISCOURSE IN INCLUSION SETTINGS:

CHALLENGES WITHIN PROFESSIONAL CONTEXTS

by

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ABSTRACT

Classroom teachers draw upon a variety of discourses to understand and make decisions about the students they teach. This case study investigation explored the discourses at work in inclusion classrooms, with particular attention paid to the way in which discourses may impact the problem of overrepresentation in special education. Frameworks that appeared to organize teacher understandings about students in inclusion settings developed into the discourses under investigation: a discourse of disability, a liberal discourse, a traditional special education discourse, and a discourse of teacher professionalism. This investigation used the frameworks of Disability Studies in Education and Critical Race Theory to formulate the research design and interpret the results. Discourses surrounding teacher understandings were unveiled through interviews with 11 teachers working in inclusion settings in middle and high schools in the suburbs outside a large metropolitan southeastern city. Results suggest that dominant discourses impact teacher understandings. In addition, two significant, unexpected findings emerged. First, an analysis of the results underscored the importance of the professional contexts within which teachers work, and second, teachers, particularly special education teachers, appear to face considerable challenges negotiating the seemingly contradictory discourses that exist within professional contexts. Further analysis points to the ways in which teachers make use of discourse to maintain their positions within dominant discourses.
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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ....................................................................................................................................... ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .................................................................................................................. iii

LIST OF TABLES .......................................................................................................................... ix

LIST OF FIGURES ....................................................................................................................... x

1 INTRODUCTION ...................................................................................................................... 1

   Impetus for the Study .................................................................................................................. 3

   Purpose of the Study .................................................................................................................. 6

   A Discourse of Disability ......................................................................................................... 8

   A Traditional Special Education Discourse ........................................................................... 9

   A Discourse of Liberalism ....................................................................................................... 10

   A Discourse of Teacher Professionalism .............................................................................. 11

   Research Questions ............................................................................................................... 13

   Theoretical Framework ......................................................................................................... 13

   Significance of the Study ....................................................................................................... 14

   Methodology ........................................................................................................................... 15

      Participant Selection ........................................................................................................... 16

   Data Analysis .......................................................................................................................... 17

   Limitations of the Study ........................................................................................................ 18

   Definition of Terms ................................................................................................................ 18

   Organization of the Study ..................................................................................................... 19
2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ............................................................................................21
  What is Disproportionality? ...............................................................................................21
  What Makes Disproportionality Problematic? .................................................................24
    Labeling Effects ...........................................................................................................24
    Segregated Placement Settings ....................................................................................26
    The Ineffectiveness of Special Education ....................................................................28
  Discourse ............................................................................................................................30
  A Discourse of Disability ...................................................................................................34
    The Impact of Deficit Thinking on Achievement ........................................................39
    Deficit Thinking and Student Behavior .........................................................................43
    Teacher Assumptions and Disciplinary Consequences ..............................................45
    Teacher Race and Disciplinary Consequences .........................................................47
  A Traditional Special Education Discourse ......................................................................49
    Teacher Referrals .........................................................................................................51
    Placement Decisions ....................................................................................................54
    Instruction ....................................................................................................................55
    Discourse as Coercion .................................................................................................56
  A Discourse of Liberalism .................................................................................................57
  Colorblindness ...............................................................................................................59
  A Discourse of Teacher Professionalism .........................................................................64
  Summary ............................................................................................................................69

3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY ...................................................................71
  Research Questions .........................................................................................................71
Theoretical Framework .................................................................72
The Special Education Divide .....................................................73
Disability Studies in Education.....................................................76
Critical Race Theory .................................................................79
Methodology ..............................................................................80
Case Study Design ......................................................................81
Site Selection .............................................................................83
Participant Selection ..................................................................84
Access .......................................................................................86
Data Collection ..........................................................................87
Data Analysis ............................................................................89
Researcher Positionality .........................................................93
Establishing Trustworthiness ..................................................95
  Credibility .............................................................................95
  Transferability ......................................................................96
  Dependability .......................................................................97
  Confirmability ......................................................................97
Limitations of the Study .........................................................97
4 RESULTS ..................................................................................101
  Special Education ...............................................................102
    Theme 1: Disability as Deficit ............................................102
    Theme 2: Leveling the Playing Field .................................111
    Theme 3: System Constraints ............................................115
Theme 4: Despite Good Intentions ............................................................................119

Student Capital .............................................................................................................122

Theme 5: Recipes for Success ...................................................................................123

Theme 6: The Elephant in the Classroom ...............................................................133

Teacher Professionalism ..................................................................................................136

Theme 7: Teachers are Committed to Students and Their Learning .........................136

Theme 8: Lots of Responsibility, Very Little Respect ..............................................141

5 DISCUSSION ...........................................................................................................................145

Summary of the Study .....................................................................................................147

Professional Contexts .......................................................................................................149

The Ways in which Teachers Make Use of Discourse ....................................................151

Teachers “Substitute” Dominant Discourses in Place of More Critical Alternatives ..............................................................................................................................152

Teachers Exploit Special Education Policy to Meet Student Needs .........................155

Teachers Exploit Special Education Policy to Meet Teacher Needs ..........................156

Implications for School Personnel ...................................................................................159

Recommendations for Future Research ...........................................................................162
REFERENCES ........................................................................................................................................... 164

APPENDICES

A  INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT ................................................................................................. 185

B  IRB APPROVAL .................................................................................................................................. 189
LIST OF TABLES

1 Demographic Information ......................................................................................................................84
LIST OF FIGURES

1 Defining elements and educational implication most pertinent to this investigation ................................................................................................................ .......................................................... 80

2 Linking of preliminary categories with research questions ................................................................. 91

3 Final category names and subcategories that best characterized the themes in the data ...... 93

4 Teacher understandings about special education .................................................................................. 102

5 Teacher understandings about student capital .................................................................................... 122

6 Teacher understandings about teacher professionalism ...................................................................... 136

7 Analysis of the research findings .................................................................................................... 151
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

One of the tasks of the progressive educator, through a serious, correct political analysis is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be. (Paulo Freire, 1994, p. 3)

Derek is a great kid and one of my favorite students to have in class. Derek is a special education student diagnosed with a learning disability in reading. He transferred into my district and lives in subsidized housing located near the high school where I teach. To some, Derek is a vivacious, spirited student of color with a vibrant personality. To others, however, Derek is crass, noisy, and ill-mannered. Derek, who also happens to be an exceptional athlete, stands out from the crowd at my upper middle-class, mostly White, suburban high school. Teachers often lose patience with Derek because he is so loud and vocal; something about Derek seems to make many teachers uncomfortable. During a typical school day, there is no doubt that Derek is in the hall because you can hear his booming voice all the way at the other end of the building. You take notice of him as he slaps kids on the back, shoves them forcefully into lockers, or picks up girls and carries them to class. Derek is usually tardy to class and never slips into a room quietly; so much socializing and so little time. Derek can be very respectful and charming; but some liken this charm to the craftiness of a used car salesman. His tardiness becomes a bone of contention for these teachers, and his unwillingness to sit quietly and take direction passively makes some of his teachers uneasy and even angry. Instead of appreciating his energy and enthusiasm, some teachers regard his vitality as a form of disrespect and seem to misunderstand his intentions.
In addition to behavioral concerns, teachers are also apprehensive about Derek’s likelihood for success in rigorous, college preparatory classes that require considerable homework and preparation for class. How would Derek complete his homework with little support from home and a mother who is in and out of jail? Teachers presume that Derek’s parents would be happy with a diploma of any kind; a technical preparatory diploma would be considered a great accomplishment. Teachers also express misgivings about Derek’s ability to get along with general education teachers who expect quiet and compliant students. Would Derek’s response to teachers when they reprimand him for his tardiness or his inability to remain quiet and passive become problematic? Would his behavior and learning disability prevent him from being successful? Would his behavior interfere with the learning of general education students? Would a college preparatory curriculum be too rigorous for him? Would his presumed lack of parental support doom him from the start?

At Derek’s freshman IEP, a decision needed to be made regarding diploma choice. Most students at my suburban high school pursue a college prep diploma, but a career technical diploma was another option at the time. The majority of teachers present at his meeting believed that it was in Derek’s best interest to pursue a less rigorous, career technical diploma that would prepare him for employment after high school; not everybody needs to go to college. They argued, based on their professional expertise and experience, that a more rigorous curriculum would likely frustrate Derek and he might ultimately drop out of school. Most teachers did not waver in their recommendations. Based on their knowledge and experience, they were convinced that their decisions were well-founded and in Derek’s best interest. They had taught students like Derek before and they were convinced they were right this time.
Derek was not willing to give in so easily, but His father said little and seemed inclined to agree with the teachers, all White middle-aged women. Ultimately, the committee reluctantly agreed to give Derek a chance and the decision was made to choose the college preparatory diploma option. Unfortunately, Derek was not successful in his college prep coursework. At his next IEP meeting the committee decided that a technical preparatory diploma would be a better option; Derek needed to graduate, the sooner the better. Derek has since graduated from high school with a technical diploma, but has also become a father. He has sole custody of his son and his father has taken considerable responsibility for Derek’s child. With the new demands of fatherhood, what happens next for Derek remains particularly uncertain.

Impetus for the Study

I work in an inclusion setting and I teach lots of students just like Derek. Inclusion is a term that means many things to many people. Narrowly defined, inclusion is the integration of disabled students into the general education classroom. A more comprehensive conception suggests that inclusion is a “broad-based reform effort to make school and classrooms accessible and responsive to all students” (Connor & Ferri, 2005a, p. 122). In this investigation, inclusion indicates a general education setting that includes both general education and special education students. In these inclusion settings there are two teachers, one general education and one special education, working together in the classroom. Inclusion teachers plan together as often as possible and share classroom responsibilities. The special education teacher is considered a highly qualified support specialist, and is primarily in charge of implementing accommodations that allow access to the general education curriculum, and specializing instruction for the special education students in the classroom. The general education teacher is primarily responsible for
content, and is the teacher of record. Placement in inclusion settings suggests that these students need more individualized attention and more differentiation in order to be successful.

Not surprisingly, inclusion classrooms look very different from on-level general education classrooms in suburban high schools. Inclusion classes are disproportionately filled with students of color and may have as many as 10 to 12 special education students. In a typical suburban high school where the percentage of African American students is approximately 15% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007-2008), there may in actuality be as many as 8 to 10 students of color in these inclusion classrooms. Students who are not special education are likely repeaters, non-English speakers, or those being monitored by Response to Intervention (RTI) support teams. All of these students, in fact, could easily be classified as “at-risk for special education placement.”

My concern for students like Derek prompted this investigation; students of color who have been in special education since elementary school and will likely stay in special education until (and if) they graduate. I suggest that classroom teachers draw upon a variety of discourses in order to understand and make decisions about the students they teach, and that these understandings impact student opportunity. My concern is that some teachers unwittingly make decisions about students, particularly students of color, based on discourses that limit student opportunity and ultimately perpetuate overrepresentation. Research indicates that public school teachers, largely White and female, are not well-prepared to teach an increasingly diverse student population (Futrell, Gomez, & Bedden, 2003; Zeichner, 1993). I propose a closer examination of the discourses at work in inclusion classrooms to better prepare teachers to meet the needs of all students and address the issue of overrepresentation.
There is a long history of disproportionality in special education, and overrepresentation, a focus of this study, is one part of the larger problem. Still today, a disproportionate number of minority students are placed in special education and often in segregated programs (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachman, 2005; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Parrish, 2002). In addition, minority students and lower income students are disproportionately administered harsher and more exclusionary disciplinary consequences (Raffaele-Mendez, & Knoff, 2003; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Townsend, 2000; Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982). What’s more, once in special education, students are rarely dismissed or moved to less restrictive placement settings (Cartledge, 2005).

Explanations for overrepresentation span a continuum that includes biological deficit (Jensen, 1969); cultural bias and insensitivity in the referral, testing and placement processes (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Jones, 1988; Patton, 1992); and racism (Blanchett, 2006; Dunn, 1968; Meyer, Harry, & Sapon-Shevin, 1997; Sleeter, 1987). Patton (1998) has suggested that special education professionals have perpetuated the disproportionality problem through their reliance on objectivist and functionalist discourses. Unfortunately, in spite of considerable attention, disproportionality remains a significant problem because of the way in which overrepresentation maintains educational discrimination and limits opportunities for students. A more detailed discussion of overrepresentation is provided in Chapter 2.

The discourses that create and sustain overrepresentation are broad and complex. Gee (1996) defined discourse (which he described as Discourse with as capital D) as,

a socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and artifacts, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or “social network.” (p. 131)
These discourses infuse the fabric of schooling, from classroom teachers in public schools to the leaders that make policy decisions in Washington. As a classroom teacher, I can have considerable impact on the students I teach. Whether I actively recognize it or not, the classroom decisions I make are a consequence of the discourses that guide my teaching behaviors. The discourses drawn upon can limit student possibilities or facilitate greater opportunities. Because teachers are so critical to student success, this study focused on the discourses that teachers draw upon to understand and make decisions about the students they teach. Although teacher decisions are presumably made with the best intentions, sensitive discourses can be particularly unsettling for the overwhelmingly White, middle-class teaching population and may in fact perpetuate overrepresentation (Patton, 1998). Cochran-Smith (1995) maintained that both veteran and preservice teachers,

need opportunities to examine much of what is usually unexamined in the tightly braided relationships of language, culture, and power in schools and schooling. This kind of examination inevitably begins with our own histories as human beings and as educators; our own experiences as members of particular races, classes, and genders; and as children, parents, and teachers in the world. It also includes a close look at the tacit assumptions we make about the motivations and behaviors of other children, other parents, and other teachers and about the pedagogies we deem most appropriate for learners who are like us or not like us. (p. 500)

Purpose of the Study

This study explored the discourses at work in inclusion classrooms. These discourses are the frameworks through which teachers understand and make decisions about their students. Particular attention was given to the way in which these discourses may impact the problem of overrepresentation in special education. Multiple discourses are undoubtedly at work in inclusion settings, and this investigation does not endeavor to define, identify, or to explore all of these
discourses. The discourses examined evolved as a result of my experiences in public schools. Frameworks that appeared to organize teacher understandings about Derek developed into the discourses under investigation. The discourses were not preconceived categories to organize the data, but were a starting point for conducting a thorough literature review about influential discourses in public schools today. These discourses were not well-developed at the outset, but were refined through an examination of the literature. These discourses include a discourse of disability, a liberal discourse, a traditional special education discourse, and a discourse of teacher professionalism.

A focus on a disability discourse was a result of my experience with the ways in which deficits are understood by school personnel, and drive school decisions. Considerable time and effort is spent in schools remediating deficiencies when students do not “measure up.” Rarely do educators place responsibility for student deficits on their own shoulders, but more often than not operate from a deficit position and “blame the victim.” Educators rely on a combination of color blindness mixed with liberalism to avoid any examination of the political constraints that work to limit individual success. The portrait of Derek highlights the ways in which these discourses influenced teacher expectations, teacher decisions, and student opportunity.

As a special educator, I have direct experience with the ways in which special education policies, practice, and understandings influence practice in public schools. A traditional discourse of special education permeates both special education and general education, and structures the way in which disabled students are understood, often leading to limited opportunities based on one-dimensional interpretations. The last discourse explored was that of teacher professionalism, a discourse that structures the ways in which teachers view themselves and their roles and responsibilities within the structure of schooling.
Multiple and sometimes competing discourses influence the ways teachers respond to and make decisions about students like Derek. Teachers, operating within a deficit understanding of disability, were often unable to appreciate Derek’s strengths, and, consequently, opportunities for Derek were limited. As a result of dominant discourses, teachers misinterpreted Derek’s behaviors, suggested a more remedial curriculum, and failed to recognize the broader structural limitations operating in public schools. The discourses that I have identified are not entirely distinct and oftentimes it is difficult to distinguish one discourse from the next. I have attempted to isolate these discourses for discussion purposes only, knowing that in reality the understandings that guide teachers work together to impact student opportunity within the broad discourse of schooling.

A Discourse of Disability

Derek lives with his father, a truck driver, and his four younger siblings. His mother is a drug addict and is periodically in and out of jail. She and Derek’s dad are no longer married, but when she is out of jail she lives in the basement of the family home. Derek shoulders a great deal of responsibility for his younger siblings and for his mother when she is at home. With a mother in and out of jail, a busy father traveling across the country to make ends meet, not to mention Derek’s learning disability, teachers just didn’t think Derek stood a chance.

A discourse of disability includes the ways in which disability is understood by school personnel. These understandings of disability are linked to the idea of normalcy, and the ways in which disability is painted as abnormal or problematic in relation to the arbitrary norm (Davis, 1995). Baker (2002) noted that the idea of normalcy has resulted in “classifying and dividing practices” that result in “the effort to normalize schoolchildren toward an ableist normativity that fails to question its privilege and results in the kinds of anguish that parents, teachers, and
children often experience and express” (p. 692). The ideology of normalcy that is supported by a deficit perspective continues to play a powerful role in schooling today.

According to Valencia (1997), there are six characteristics of deficit thinking that have been used for centuries to account for student failure. These include the following: “blaming the victim, oppression, pseudoscience, temporal changes, educability, and heterodoxy” (p. 3). Evidence of a disability discourse grounded in deficit thought was easily recognizable in the discussions about Derek. Although few teachers and policymakers today would outwardly characterize their understandings of disability in such pejorative terms, deficit thinking continues to be reflected in teacher expectations and current practice and policies.

Teachers, both special education and general education, have spent considerable energy focusing on what students cannot do as opposed to what students can do, and failure to capitalize on student strengths is particularly detrimental to students from diverse backgrounds (Banks, 2002; Guinier, 2002; Obiakor & Ford, 2002). The ways in which teachers understand and respond to disability impact the ways in which students “become disabled” in schools. The ideology of normalcy persists in public schools today and continues to perpetuate the “disability as deficit” discourse. Research questions that focus on the ways in which teachers respond to and understand student disability are explored in this investigation.

A Traditional Special Education Discourse

*Derek would get along better in lower level teamed classes where the environment is more relaxed, the curriculum less demanding and there is an additional teacher to discipline and assist Derek when necessary. Because Derek was not a good reader, he would probably never make it in college anyway.*

The discourses that surround the field of special education influence classroom practice, and evidence of a traditional special education discourse was clearly evident during the
discussions about Derek. Special education evolved from the disciplines of science, medicine, and psychology and continues to this day to maintain a positivist stance. Students who are not successful in school are identified, tested, and labeled through quantitative means by a committee of special and general educators, diagnosticians, and school psychologists. If students are found eligible for services they are subsequently placed in classes, schools, or programs to address their specific disability needs. Because of their intrinsic deficits, these students are prescribed remediation through reductionist teaching methods (Poplin, 1985, 1988). Each year Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are written to address these student deficiencies. These plans include goals and objectives, accommodations and modifications, testing considerations, and placement options. Critical researchers assert that special education policy results from the ideology of normalcy, and is the mechanism through which those students who are considered different from the norm are excluded (Meyer et al., 1997).

A discourse based upon traditional special education understandings focuses attention on the student in isolation, with little consideration given to social, cultural, or political perspectives. Research questions that focus on special education policy and practice in response to individual student needs within the classroom are explored in this investigation.

A Discourse of Liberalism

In informal teacher discussions prior to Derek’s freshman IEP, teachers voiced serious concerns about Derek’s likelihood for success in high school. Many expressed concerns about his behavioral style, his lack of follow-through on homework assignments, and his lack of attention in class. Derek just did not seem to have the motivation or work ethic to succeed.

Classical liberalism is based on the principles of individualism, competition, and reward based on personal work ethic (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1987). Proverbs such as “God helps those
who help themselves” or “Stand on your own two feet” illustrate the liberal ideology and the ways in which these understandings unwittingly permeate educational thought. Educators express (or think) these sentiments all the time. A liberal discourse maintains that schools are fair and equitable institutions, and success and failure are dependent upon individual effort, character, and biological capacity (Olssen, Codd, & O’Neill, 2004).

A liberal discourse fails to recognize the ways in which social positioning based on racialized, classed, gendered, or abled identities influences individual opportunities for success (Flax, 1999; Olssen et al, 2004). A discourse of liberalism presumes a level playing field and relies on a discourse of color blindness to sustain it. Over a century ago, DuBois (1903) predicted that racism would become a significant social problem, and history has confirmed his presumptions. Discussions about racism are not easy, and Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an attempt to move these discussions front and center (Tate, 1997). Critical Race Theory rejects liberalism on three grounds: the notion of colorblindness, the neutrality of the law, and the support of incremental change (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). The CRT critique of liberalism is explored further in Chapter 2.

A Discourse of Teacher Professionalism

Teachers felt very confident regarding their recommendations for Derek. They knew Derek, they knew his family, and they were experienced and knowledgeable about the realities of schooling today. They were convinced that Derek should follow a less rigorous, technical path in order to graduate and exit school quickly.

What does it mean to be a professional? According to Furlong (2000), traditional conceptions of professionalism generally include the following interrelated characteristics:

- a specialized knowledge base
- autonomy in judgment
• responsible decision making based on shared, professional values

Although there is some debate about whether teachers possess these characteristics, particularly related to issues of autonomy, most teachers would insist that they are professionals and accomplish their teaching responsibilities in a professional manner. Because teacher professionalism remains an imprecise, ambiguous, and deeply contested construct, teachers make meaning of the professional educator discourse in multiple and diverse ways. Goodson and Hargreaves (1996) defined different types of teacher professionalism that include Classical, Flexible, Practical, Extended, and Complex Professionalism. More recently, Sachs (2003) advocated a Transformative Professionalism that she defined as follows:

- inclusive;
- guided by a public, ethical code of practice;
- collaborative and collegial;
- activist;
- flexible and progressive;
- responsive to change;
- self-regulating;
- policy-active;
- enquiry oriented; and
- knowledge building. (p. 16)

Because I am a classroom teacher and my perspective is that of practitioner rather than policymaker, I relied primarily on the Five Core Propositions developed by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS, 2011) to define the discourse of teacher professionalism. These Propositions are as follows:

- Proposition 1: Teachers are Committed to Students and Their Learning
- Proposition 2: Teachers Know the Subjects They Teach and How to Teach Those Subjects to Students
- Proposition 3: Teachers are Responsible for Managing and Monitoring Student Learning
- Proposition 4: Teachers Think Systematically about Their Practice and Learn from Experience
- Proposition 5: Teachers are Members of Learning Communities
Chapter 2 provides a more detailed examination of a discourse of teacher professionalism and the ways in which different conceptualizations of professionalism transform the discourse. Research questions that focus on the ways in which teachers experience, and understandings of teacher professionalism influence classroom practice, are explored in this investigation.

Research Questions

The central question explored in this investigation was, “What discourses do inclusion teachers draw upon to understand and make decisions about the students they teach?”

Additional sub-questions included the following:

1. In what ways do teachers describe the students they teach and what characteristics inform these portraits?
2. In what ways does teacher education, experience, and identity influence teacher understandings?
3. How do teachers make sense of special education policy, practice, and guidelines?
4. How do school policies, practices, and climate influence everyday practice and the particular needs of students?
5. What do teachers perceive as the implications of these classroom decisions on the educational futures of their students?

Theoretical Framework

Dominant mainstream discourses that develop in response to White, middle-class values fail to account for students like Derek. To increase opportunities for all students, the taken-for-granted discourses that currently inform educational practice must be examined and
reconceptualized. To accomplish this, a critical perspective that addresses the cultural, social, and political positionings of individuals within institutions was employed. This investigation used the frameworks of Disability Studies in Education and Critical Race Theory to formulate the research design and interpret the results.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for a number of reasons:

1. In an effort to confront the problem of overrepresentation from a different perspective, this study focus was at the classroom level.

There is considerable evidence to show that teachers initiate the majority of referrals for special education services and, once referred, most students are placed (Mehan, Hartwick, & Meihls, 1986). There is less information about what happens to students after placement, however. This study was significant because it examined the discourses at work in secondary classrooms, long after most special education placements have already been determined. Because this investigation was situated within high schools and middle schools, where fewer initial referrals, evaluations, and placements occur, particular attention was paid to issues of overrepresentation in regard to access and the least restrictive environment, course choice, transition, and discipline.

2. This study listened to the voices of classroom teachers.

Teacher knowledge research, according to Rosiek and Atkinson (2005), falls within one of four traditions: the scholarship of teaching, action research and teacher research, narrative inquiry, and critical-cultural teacher research. Although Rosiek and Atkinson suggested a means
to “bridge the divide,” they maintained that teacher knowledge research of any kind is significant because these traditions share in common an emphasis on honoring teaching practice and on improving it through closer examination of teachers’ practical knowledge and work. Each model, in our opinion, is persuasive. They all articulate important ways in which the intellectual work of teaching deserves respect and provide specific implications for how teacher education programs and policy might enact that respect. (p. 10)

Information gained by listening to teachers may encourage classroom teachers to capitalize on discourses that empower students.

3. This study explored the problem of overrepresentation from a qualitative perspective.

Considerable effort has gone into quantifying the disproportionality issue, but much less attention has been paid to understanding what’s behind the numbers. Patton (1998) and Pugach (2001) asserted that the positivist research stance employed in special education has, in fact, contributed to disproportionality by disregarding sociocultural and political discourses. This investigation did attend to the cultural and political discourses that inform teacher decisions. A qualitative research focus supports the notion of knowledge construction and includes the voices of teachers in research (Cochran-Smith, 1995).

Methodology

A qualitative approach was chosen as the most suitable method to explore the discourses that inclusion teachers draw upon to understand and make decisions about the students they teach. Because my research questions were exploratory in scope they were best investigated through a case study design. Merriam (1998) pointed out that a case study offers a way to investigate “complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in
understanding the phenomenon” (p. 41). The unit of analysis in this investigation was the discourses that teachers draw upon in inclusion classrooms.

Participant Selection

Teams of inclusion teachers at local high schools and middle schools in a county outside a southeastern urban center were interviewed during the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years. My intent was to include teams that could provide valuable, specific information for this study. At the outset, I also hoped to primarily focus on schools where students of color are in the minority. However, the realities of participant recruitment compelled me to include any and all schools and teachers from my district willing to participate. After my research proposal was approved by my district, I received approval to contact principals at 28 schools. Not all principals were willing to allow access, but those who were willing referred me to department chairs within their buildings to seek individual teacher approval. Setting up teacher interviews proved to be no easy task. Numerous teachers agreed to work with me at the outset, but difficulty in scheduling left me with only 11 participants. These 11 teachers, however, were helpful and well meaning and I appreciate their input.

Six schools were included in this investigation. All three middle schools had made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in 2009-2010, yet only one high school, High School X, made AYP in that same year. The high schools had populations between 1,800 and 2,100 students; Middle School C had approximately 800 students, with Middle Schools A and B both larger with 1,100 and 1,200 students, respectively. Students of color were in the majority in High Schools X and Y, and Middle School B. These same schools also had the highest levels of students eligible for free or reduced lunch. All of the high school teachers teamed freshman math and were White
females, and the teams at two middle schools, Middle Schools A and C, teamed 8th grade math. The special education teacher at Middle School B teamed 8th grade science. The special education teachers at Middle Schools A and B were both White males; all other middle school teachers were White females. These teams of teachers were interviewed separately on several different occasions throughout those school years. Fifteen interviews with teachers were conducted during the 2009-2010 school year, and three teacher interviews were conducted during the 2010-2011 school year.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this investigation followed the recommendations of Merriam (1998). The first phase involved transcribing the participant interviews word for word. Next, with my research questions in front of me, I examined the data and highlighted relevant responses. Then, data pieces in each transcript were grouped together around common topics that appeared to be possible answers to the research questions. Each transcript was compared to the next. These collections of data pieces organized in response to my research questions were compared, consolidated, and refined, ultimately creating one inclusive document. This document was then examined systematically in an attempt to more accurately convey the meaning of the data. Then, categories and category names were chosen to best represent the essence of the data. Finally, broad themes, or classes, that emerged within categories were articulated.

During this investigation, I listened to the voices of teachers to gain insight into the discourses that influenced their practice and impacted student opportunity. Teachers are a fundamental link between students and opportunity and their voices deserve to be heard. According to Van Galen (2004), researchers tend to focus on what teachers fail to do rather than
what they actually do; blaming teachers is like blaming mothers. Qualitative research that listens to teachers and explores the discourses that influence teacher decisions can provide impetus for school improvement and student opportunity.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study were as follows:

- There was an insufficient number of interviews with participants.
- Participants seemed reluctant to speak on sensitive topics.
- The study did not include classroom observations.
- Participants were not diverse.

As a result of these limitations, triangulation of the data was never achieved.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions are included here for clarity, but are developed further in Chapter 2:

**Discourse:** Bodies of knowledge (not just language) within a certain field that become a “regime of truth” and change over time. Discourse shapes the way we view our world, produces knowledge and “truth” about the discipline and about the speaker, and speaks to issues of power (Foucault, 1980).

**Color blind ideology:** The assertion that race does not matter or that cultural, not biological, explanations account for racial disparities (Crenshaw, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Lewis, 2001).
Disability (medical interpretation): Key assumptions of the medical model, according to Brantlinger (1997), include the following:

- Disabilities are problematic, innate conditions.
- Labels are necessary and useful for students that lie outside the norm.
- Specialized, intensive and individualized instruction and interventions are necessary for disabled students to achieve normalcy.
- Special education professionals know what is best.

Disability (Disability Studies interpretation): Rather than individual deficit, disability is considered natural, human variation and is constructed through interactions between the individual and society (Connor & Ferri, 2006; Oliver, 1996). The Disability Studies model of disability, like the social model of disability, rejects the medical model.

Disproportionality: The overrepresentation and underrepresentation of a particular population or demographic group in special education programs relative to their percentage in the total student population.

Organization of the Study

Five chapters are included in this study. Chapter 1 introduced the purpose of the study and the questions that guided the research. A brief introduction to methodology, along with limitations and operational definitions were also included.

Chapter 2 reviews and examines the literature relevant to the research problem, and identifies the gaps in the research in regard to teachers, discourse, and overrepresentation. In addition, the four discourses that emerged in response to teaching experience will be examined through a review of the literature.
Chapter 3 describes the research rationale, methodology, participants, and study locations. The two theoretical frameworks, Disability Studies in Education, and Critical Race Theory are also introduced. Chapter 4 reports the results from participant interviews and identifies the themes that emerged. Chapter 5 provides the study summary, an interpretation of the results, and suggested applications for public school practitioners. Suggestions for future research are also included.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

True discourse, liberated by the nature of its form from desire and power, is incapable of recognizing the will to truth which pervades it; and the will to truth, having imposed itself upon us for so long, is such that the truth it seeks to reveal cannot fail to mask it. (Michel Foucault, 1972, “The Discourse on Language”)

This literature review begins with an examination of disproportionality in special education with particular attention paid to overrepresentation: what it is and why it is problematic. This is followed by a discussion on discourse with a focus on its educational significance and implications. The four discourses that were evident in the conversations about Derek, a discourse of disability, a traditional special education discourse, a discourse of liberalism, and a discourse of teacher professionalism are examined next, along with the relevant empirical and theoretical literature.

What is Disproportionality?

Disproportionality has been defined as “unequal proportions of culturally diverse students in [special education] programs” (Artiles & Trent, 2000, p. 514). Although this definition seems simple and straightforward, disproportionality is a complex issue and has multiple connotations. From a critical perspective, O’Connor and Fernandez (2006) contend that disproportionality is, in reality, the “structured probability with which minority youth are more likely to be ‘documented’ as disabled” (p. 10). Once documented as disabled, these students of color are placed in special education classrooms that are, according to Watts and Erevelles (2004),
“internal colonies,” spaces of exclusion and segregation that are overpopulated by poor students of color. In addition, these marginalized and disenfranchised students have been stigmatized by labels and are characterized as violent.

Unlike the critical perspective, the mainstream view of disproportionality is technically defined (Losen & Orfield, 2002). From this standpoint, the reality of overrepresentation means that,

- African American students are overrepresented in the soft, high incidence disability categories of learning disability, mild mental retardation, and emotional disturbance (Harry & Anderson, 1994; Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Oswald, Coutinho, & Best, 2002; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Noteworthy studies conducted by Parrish (2002) have shown that Black males are over twice as likely as Whites to be labeled mentally retarded in 38 states, emotionally disturbed in 29 states, and learning disabled in 8 states.
- African American students are overrepresented in lower level classes (Braddock, 1993; Gay, 2000; Meier, Stewart & England, 1989; Mickelson, 2001; Oakes 1985; Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999; Townsend, 2000).
- African American students are educated in the most restrictive placement settings (Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Hosp & Reschly, 2002; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Oswald et al., 2002; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggins-Azziz, 2006). In analyzing nationwide data collected by the Office of Civil Rights, Parrish (2002) concluded that White students are generally only placed in more restrictive self-contained classes when they need intensive services. Students of color, however, may be more likely to be placed in the restrictive settings whether they require intensive services or not. (p. 26)
- African Americans, particularly males, are disciplined by suspension, expulsion, and corporal punishment at significantly higher rates than their percentage in the general school population (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975; Costenbader & Markson 1998; Irvine, 1990; Johnston, 2000; McCarthy & Hoge 1987; Meier et al., 1989; Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron, 2002; Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Skiba & Rausch, 2006; Skiba et al., 2002; Studley, 2002; Taylor & Foster 1986; Townsend, 2000). Furthermore, Black boys are consistently administered harsher and more frequent disciplinary consequences than girls or Whites (Ferguson, 2000), both in elementary and secondary classrooms (Skiba et al., 2002; Taylor & Foster, 1986). Emihovich (1983) and McCadden (1998) found that Black boys were more likely to be singled out and disciplined even when other students exhibited the same behaviors.

These staggering statistics paint a bleak picture of limited opportunities for students of color in today’s classrooms. Those who focus on technical and statistical understandings of overrepresentation alone maintain that fine tuning special education will eliminate disproportionality. However, these technical orientations ignore the historical, ideological, and discriminatory elements of disproportionality (Artiles, 2003; Brantlinger, 2004). Skrtic (1991) was one of the first to challenge the mainstream discourse of special education, claiming that school failure was a result of “organizational pathology” not individual deficit. Arguing for an alternative discourse to the hegemonic practices in special education that privilege some at the expense of others, Reid and Valle (2004) maintain that,

To say that we are positioned by discourses is not to say, however, that they determine us: Through action, reflection, and consensus, we can resist and eventually change the discourse itself. Because we know that exclusionary practices are inherently marginalizing and unjust—whether they make instruction easier and more effective or not—we contend that we are ethically bound to choose to elevate values over negative data (and negative attitudes) about academic outcomes and work to reform and even transform
the educational system to accommodate all learners. Public school classrooms are not for some children but for all children. But our discursive practices are standing in the way; we tend to see the process of education the way it is, not as it could be. (p. 478)

This investigation looked beyond statistics to explore the ways in which teacher understandings in inclusion classrooms may impact overrepresentation.

What Makes Disproportionality Problematic?

Disproportionality is indicative of the “inherent inequities within our educational system that prejudice outcomes for minority students” (Daniels, 1998, p. 41). The result is that for many African American and some poor students, special education has become a form of segregation from the mainstream (Orfield, 2001). Disproportionality is problematic on a number of levels, but three particular areas of concern are scrutinized: labeling effects, segregated placement settings, and the ineffectiveness of special education.

Labeling Effects

The ideology of normalcy has resulted in the practice of labeling. To illustrate the way in which normalcy operates to marginalize those that are different, Davis (2009) contended that “the person with disabilities is singled out as a dramatic case of not belonging” (p. 363). The sorting process that occurs in schools is not an attempt to meet the needs of students as some contend, but is instead a response to societal pressure (Thomas & Loxley, 2001; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Thurlow, 2000). According to and Ferri (2005b), labeling and placement decisions in schools were based primarily on stereotypic beliefs about White intellectual superiority. As racial segregation in schools was being challenged, segregation based on disability became more common.
The ideology of normalcy is so pervasive that the effects of labeling go unquestioned. In fact, labeling appears necessary, natural, and humane. Hallahan and Kauffman (1994) go so far as to suggest that the effects of labeling can be valuable, even for the disabled:

Labels in and of themselves are not evil. How they are interpreted by others and the labeled person determines whether they are harmful or ameliorative. The challenge is to educate society to use labels to arrive at a better understanding of persons with disabilities, to avoid over generalizing and stereotyping based on labels, and to see the individual behind the label. The challenge is also to help persons with a disability to use their label as a basis for self-understanding, not as an excuse for failure to learn what they are able, a justification for choosing unacceptable behavior, or a reason to feel unworthy. (p. 503)

Unfortunately, the fact that African American students are isolated from the mainstream at rates greater than their White peers, also seems natural and necessary (Fierros & Conroy, 2002). This happens, in spite of the fact that special education labels and categories, premised on scientific and medical grounds, are constantly changing (Brantlinger, 1997). Labeling has deleterious effects on the treatment of, placement of, and outcomes for students (Patton, 1998). McDermott and Varenne (2006) contended that a learning disability, in fact, is not about cognitive impairment at all, but is about a method for differentiating people and treating them differently.

The disability label has different meanings and consequences for Black students than for White students (Connor & Ferri, 2005a). According to Parrish (2002), White students receiving special education services have greater access to extra support, are more likely to be educated in a general education setting, and are more likely to be granted accommodations for high stakes tests. In fact, because of these accommodations, upper-class White parents often seek the diagnosis of learning disability for the extra allowances it affords their children (Sireci, Scarpati, & Li, 2005). Students of color, however, do not experience these same “benefits,” and the stigma associated with receiving a “special education” (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Oswald et al.,
burdens minority students who are disproportionately enrolled in special education programs (Eitle, 2002).

The benefits of special education have not been equitably distributed (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Research indicates that special education students of color have decreased access to general education and have poorer transition outcomes than Whites (Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002; Fierros, & Conroy, 2002; Osher, Sims, & Woodruff, 2002; Oswald et al., 2002; Parrish, 2002). In addition, the families of these students are often too overwhelmed to effectively navigate the special education bureaucracy or to challenge the recommendations of experts in the field, and have limited access to advocates that might shield them from labeling in the first place (Parrish, 2002). The process of labeling and the tracking that results has negative effects on academic performance, self-esteem, classroom behavior, education and career goals, and motivation (Nieto, 1996). Because the least powerful members of society have been impacted the most by these arbitrary labeling and sorting designations, McDermott and Varenne (2006) insisted on three principles to guide future research: “Never accept a problem as stated; Be particularly wary of problems defined in terms of individuals; Resist vigorously all problems identified by received categories of kinds of person” (p. 28).

**Segregated Placement Settings**

Segregated placement settings result from tracking or ability grouping. According to Welner (2001), tracking or ability grouping is present when the following occurs:

- Educators determine class placements based on intellectual abilities, past achievement or predictions about future success.
- Educators differentiate the curriculum in these settings.
Labeling leads to placement, and, in the case of African American students, this unfortunately leads to placement in segregated settings at rates higher than for White students (Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Mickelson, 2001; Serwatka, Deering, & Grant, 1995). This is particularly true for those in higher incidence categories (Reschly, 1998), and for those African American students with poor anger control (Hosp & Reschly, 2002; Townsend, 2000).

The least restrictive environment (LRE) mandate of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) states that students with disabilities must be educated with nondisabled children “to the maximum extent appropriate” (The Federal Register, 1999, p. 12457). It further states that disabled students may be removed from the general education environment only if they cannot be satisfactorily educated with the use of supplementary aids and services. Placements that allow maximum access to the general education curriculum and contact with nondisabled peers are preferred unless the IEP team decides that an alternative placement is required. Unfortunately, evidence indicates that African American students are more likely to be excluded from inclusive education programs and the general education curriculum (Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger et al., 2006). Critics have charged that restrictive placement settings place these students in separate and unequal tracks that deny them access to the general education curriculum (Patton, 1998). Furthermore, the amount of time a special education student is placed in a general education setting is highly correlated to the student’s race (Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Harry, 1992).

Although IDEA has been successful in giving students with disabilities access to public education, the fact remains that large numbers of students, particularly students of color, are educated in more, rather than less, restrictive placements. In these restrictive placement settings, Donovan and Cross (2002) noted that African American students have less access to
academically successful peers. Linton (1998) and Lipsky and Gartner (1996) argued that LRE has contributed to the separate and unequal general education and special education systems that exist today. The historical connections between school desegregation, special education, and resegregation are undeniable and have contributed significantly to the disproportionality problem (Connor & Ferri, 2005a). In fact, Connor and Ferri have charged that special education practices have encouraged racial segregation under the pretense of disability.

The Ineffectiveness of Special Education

The effectiveness of special education has been scrutinized since its inception. In the late 1960s, Dunn (1968) expressed alarm about the overrepresentation of ethnic and language minority students in self-contained classes; he wondered whether special education might be doing more harm than good. The critique continued into the 1980s and 1990s, when others expressed similar concerns about the efficacy of special services (Allington, 1994; McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1989; O’Sullivan, Ysseldyke, Christenson, & Thurlow, 1990; Skrtic, 1991). Nearly 50 years after Dunn’s challenge, the debate about the efficacy and equity of special education programs continues:

The provision of special education related services under the medical model may give the inappropriate impression that the disability is being addressed when in some cases these practices may actually exacerbate the impact of the disability. (Walker, Horner, Sugai, Bullis, Sprague, Bricker, & Kaufman, 1996, as cited by Hehir and Others, 2005, p. 14)

Although there is some evidence that different programs and placements may be differentially effective (Kavale & Forness, 1999), Harry and Klingner (2006) maintained that K-12 minority students in special education receive a limited, less rigorous curriculum, and fewer and more technically-oriented services in more segregated settings. Reid and Valle (2004) asserted that special education instruction relies on three types of instruction: differentiated,
compensatory, and accommodating. This substandard, watered-down curriculum is in response to a deficit perspective that permeates special education discourse (Ferri & Connor, 2005b). In addition, these methods fail to incorporate a culturally responsive pedagogy that capitalizes on student experiences and histories; disengaged students do not reach their fullest potential and only attain minimal skills. In a critique of literary instruction in the United States, Macedo (1993) contended that this drill and practice, reductionist type of instruction discourages independent thought and critical thinking. This type of instruction that Macedo identifies, “literacy for stupidification,” perpetuates the hierarchies of power that marginalize poor, minority, and disabled youth.

Evidence pointing to the ineffectiveness of special education for students of color is abundant (Heller, Holtzman, & Messick 1982; Hilliard 1992). African American students make achievement gains and exit special education at rates considerably lower than those of White students with disabilities (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Additionally, minority students in special education classrooms experience higher dropout rates than Whites, are less likely to have highly qualified, certified teachers, and are less likely to graduate with a high school diploma (Chamberlain, 2005). Lower academic expectations can diminish academic achievement and future opportunities for students of color (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Special education is anything but special for students of color.

The majority of overrepresentation research has focused on issues surrounding identification and diagnosis in elementary schools. What happens after placement in the classroom has received considerably less attention. This investigation focused on teachers in inclusion settings and the ways in which discourse may influence classroom practice. The words of Reid and Valle (2004) are worth repeating at this point:
Public school classrooms are not for some children but for all children. But our discursive practices are standing in the way; we tend to see the process of education the way it is, not as it could be. (p. 478)

Dominant discourses influence teacher assumptions, understandings, and decisions. Consequently, these discourses may perpetuate the status quo and limit opportunities for students of color. A greater understanding of the interactions between teachers and discourse is needed in order to maximize student (and teacher) potential.

Discourse

Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it. (Michel Foucault, 1972, “The Discourse on Language”)

Discourse, described by Gee (2005) as situated meanings, is intimately connected with power and privilege in public schools. Arguably, one of the first to connect discourse with power was Michel Foucault (Rabinow, 1984). Foucault (1980) made a distinction between two forms of power: disciplinary power and sovereign power. Sovereign power is clearly identifiable and overt. Disciplinary power, on the other hand, is more covert and less adversarial. According to Foucault, disciplinary power controls and shapes us, whether we know it or not. As a result, discourse may be understood to represent the ways in which power and knowledge work together and operate in society to create truth and meaning. According to Foucault (1972), discourses are tools for “detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time” (p. 49). Power, according to Foucault, can also be negative or positive, visible or invisible. Significantly, power establishes who is included or excluded from conversation and discourse.
To understand discourse, it is also necessary to understand truth. Foucault (1980) discussed the ways in which society generates truth:

Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (p.131)

These regimes of truth are the rules, norms, and discourses that are associated with specific disciplines or institutions. In this way truth is created, maintained, and shaped by power to generate discourse. As a result, truth that is sanctioned becomes discourse. Foucault (1980) suggested that “Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it” (p. 133). To summarize, Foucault (1980) characterized truth in five ways:

1. Truth is produced by and through scientific discourse and disciplines.
2. Truth is shaped by economic and political power.
3. Truth, whatever form it takes, infuses our institutions and disciplines.
4. Truth is produced and transmitted by those in power.
5. Truth continues to be an ideological struggle.

During teacher conversations about Derek, “regimes of truth” were revealed as discourses that spoke about the ways in which disability is understood, the ways in which democratic, liberal discourses work to silence real conversation about race, the ways in which special education practice and policy limit viable alternatives, and the ways in which understandings of teacher professionalism impact student opportunity.

Pertinent to this investigation are the ways in which discourse operates within special education. Reid and Valle (2004) examined special education from a Foucauldian perspective in
their article entitled “The Discursive Practice of LD.” In their examination, Reid and Valle interpreted discourse to mean the following: “the system of rules that defines what can be said (i.e., what counts as natural and true within a particular discursive practice) and the instrument through which people become positioned, but not determined, within that discourse” (p. 466). Discourse is both a product and a process, and Reid and Valle reminded us that we are not passive recipients or agents of any discourse. Both our participation and our opposition impact discourse in particular ways. Importantly, Reid and Valle also highlighted the fluid and interconnected nature of discourse that Foucault spoke about (Foucault, 1972). These interconnected and associated discourses are impossible to isolate because they create, maintain, impact, and define themselves and the other discourses within which they operate.

Although Foucault’s writings about discourse are particularly influential, James Gee also made significant contributions. Gee, a noted scholar recognized for his work in integrating language, learning, and literacy within sociocultural contexts, emphasizes that discourse is more than language; discourse represents “situated meanings” or framing models (Gee, 2005). Gee (1989) defined discourse as “a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of action that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or social network” (p. 18). In addition, Gee (1989) identified five significant points regarding discourse:

1. “Discourses are inherently ‘ideological.’”
2. “Discourses are resistant to internal criticism and self-scrutiny.”
3. “Discourse-defined positions from which to speak and behave are not, however, just defined internal to a discourse, but also as standpoints taken up by the discourse in its relation to other, ultimately opposing, discourses.”
4. “Any discourse concerns itself with certain objects and puts forward certain concepts, viewpoints and values at the expense of others.”

5. “Finally, discourses are intimately related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structure in society.” (p. 19)

Put in practical terms, Gee suggested that discourse functions as an “identity kit,” an owner’s manual filled with (discourse) specific instructions that guarantee your position within the discourse. Teacher conversations about Derek suggested that teachers were indeed operating within the broad discourse of schooling.

Gee (2005) further developed his understanding of discourse and expanded on the notion of “situated meanings,” with the development of Discourse models. Gee defined Discourse models as,

the largely unconscious theories we hold that help us make sense of texts and the world. Discourse models, are simplified, often unconscious and taken-for-granted, theories about how the world works that we use to get on efficiently with our daily lives. We learn them from experiences we have had, but, crucially, as these experiences are shaped and normed by the social and cultural groups to which we belong. From such experiences we infer what is “normal” or “typical” and tend to act on these assumptions unless something clearly tells us that we are facing an exception. (p. 71)

Gee’s notion of Discourse models represents the understanding of discourse that drove this investigation. This investigation explored the ‘situated meanings’ and Discourse models that teachers draw upon to understand their students.

Teachers routinely struggle to respond effectively to students like Derek in their classrooms. Teachers working in inclusion settings make decisions everyday about curriculum and instruction, student involvement and participation, differentiation, assessment, placement, accommodations, and discipline that result from my understandings and response to discourse. These decisions range from the seemingly mundane to those that are far more significant;
decisions that may have far-reaching and long-lasting consequences. Discourses, both conventional and critical, inform teaching practice and influence teacher understandings. Documenting decisions is relatively straightforward, but recognizing and confronting the discourses that inform these decisions is much more complicated. Because teacher decisions, made with good intentions, may, in reality, do more harm than good, it is imperative to explore the discourses that teachers draw upon to understand the students they teach.

The next section examines the relevant literature located within the specific discourses that seemed most evident in my experiences with students like Derek. These discourses include a discourse of disability, a discourse of liberalism, a traditional special education discourse, and a discourse of teacher professionalism.

A Discourse of Disability

A discourse of disability cannot be understood without first recognizing the significant role that “normalcy” plays in constructing disability. According to Davis (1995),

To understand the disabled body, one must return to the concept of the norm, the normal body. So much about writing about disability has focused on the disabled person as the object of study, just as the study of race has focused on the person of color. But as with recent scholarship on race, which has turned its attention to whiteness, I would like to focus not so much on the construction of disability as on the construction of normalcy. I do this because the “problem” is not the person with disabilities; the problem is with the way that normalcy is constructed to create the ‘problem’ of the disabled person. (pp. 22-23)

In Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body (1995), Davis traced the history of normalcy in western society, the eugenics movement, and the significant role statistics has played in contributing to the ideology of normalcy. Davis pointed out the ways in which the bell curve legitimized the norm and stigmatized those at the extreme ends of the curve. Those that lie at the outer extremes of the curve, the “deviants,” become the disabled and disability
becomes “inextricably linked with pathology” (Linton, 1988, p. 6). Foucault (1991) discussed at length the idea of normalcy and normalizing judgment, and the arbitrary standard by which individuals are judged good or evil. He noted that,

> We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the social-worker-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements. (p. 304)

As a result, disabled bodies are constructed, labeled, and sorted in relation to arbitrary norms and mainstream standards. Reid and Knight (2006) have suggested that the medical conception of disability coupled with the ideology of normalcy has played a significant role in maintaining and contributing to the problem of disproportionality in special education. In addition, some suggest that this “normalizing judgement” is nothing short of institutionalized racism or resegregation, intended to maintain White supremacy (Apple, 2000; Ferri & Connor, 2005a; Ladson-Billings, 1999).

Understandings of disability are impacted by the severity and type of disability; the degree to which the disabled student “deviates” from the norm. Students with low incidence disabilities (cerebral palsy or Down’s syndrome, for example) come to school already diagnosed; their disabilities are more visible and medically defined. This investigation focused specifically on students labeled with high incidence disabilities such as learning disabilities, behavior disorders, or attention deficit disorder. According to Blanchett (2010), the construction of learning disabilities has been an attempt to “normalize” students with high incidence disabilities as much as possible. Students in inclusion settings with high incidence disabilities become “disabled” at school after failing to meet academic or behavioral norms. In addition, their diagnoses are subjective and linked to disproportionality.
The development of learning disabilities as a disability category sheds some light on the ways in which schools function to disable students, particularly those with high incidence, subjective disability labels. Over 20 years ago, Christine Sleeter (1987) chronicled the construction and development of the learning disabilities label in her seminal article, “Why is there learning disabilities? A critical analysis of the birth of the field in its social context.” Sleeter maintains that the development of learning disability (LD) as a discipline demonstrates the way in which labels have been arbitrarily used to marginalize students of color. In the 1960s, the use of the LD label grew quickly because it provided access to special education services for families of White, middle-class children who were unable to meet the increased academic demands of post-Sputnik era curriculum reform. The LD label was a more preferred and less stigmatizing way to explain their children’s difficulties, while at the same time segregating these White, middle-class children from special education students of color who were “culturally deprived” or “mentally retarded.” Sleeter pointed out the ways in which the learning disability label, constructed within a political discourse of schooling, relates to the idea of normalcy:

But in accepting commonly-used categories for children, we also tacitly accept an ideology about what schools are for, what society should be like, and what the ‘normal’ person should be like. Far from being objective fact, ideology rests on values and assumptions that cannot be proven, and that serve some people better than others. (p. 211)

In 2010, a special issue of Disability Studies Quarterly, revisited Christine Sleeter’s article about the social construction of learning disabilities. Commenting over 20 years later on Sleeter’s article, Skrtic and McCall (2010) emphasized the connections that still exist between the learning disability label and the ideology of normalcy, as it relates to mainstream White culture. Understandings of disability in schools are a consequence of these connections that attempt to make these categories seem scientific and necessary. The sorting and labeling that
typifies a school’s response to difference “are institutional artifacts, discursive practices that emerged to contain the failures of a largely non-adaptable social institution faced with the changing value demands of a dynamic institutional environment” (Skrtic & McCall, 2010). Consequently, labeling, categorizing, and disabling were not student driven initiatives, but were school responses to political pressures and criticisms. According to Gallagher (2010), attempts to legitimize the learning disability label have been successful in spite of little supportive, empirical evidence. In fact,

The field’s ongoing tribulations vis-à-vis efforts to define and redefine learning disabilities while simultaneously maintaining their objective/independent existence has constituted something of a quiet crisis in that these activities should long ago have signaled some rather momentous implications raising fundamental doubts and well-placed objections from educators and the public alike. (para. 5)

Although advocates appear unable to adequately explain the nature of learning disabilities, the label survives and considerable attempts at reconceptualization continue. According to Gallagher, “Transforming a social reality into an “objective” reality is hard work, but somebody had to do it” (Response to Intervention: Learning Disability for the Twenty-First Century section, para. 1). The history and development of the category of learning disability reveals the highly subjective and political nature of disability labels. Consequently, understanding disability within schools, particularly high incidence disabilities, continues to be a complex phenomenon linked directly with the ideology of normalcy and deficit thinking.

Deficit thinking has been used to explain and justify student failure for centuries (Valencia, 1997). In fact, discussions about Derek and his likelihood for academic success were framed in deficit terms. Valencia identified six elements that characterize deficit thinking. They include the following (p. 3):
• Blaming the victim

Deficit thinking maintains that poor students and minorities are unsuccessful in school because they lack motivation and ability; the individual is the problem, not public education. Rhodes (1995) suggested that ‘blaming the victim’ pathologizes groups based on color and socioeconomic status.

• Oppression

As a result of deficit thinking, students are “kept in their place” through compulsory ignorance laws, school segregation, and high-stakes testing.

• Pseudoscience

Deficit thinking is “verified” through pseudoscience. According to Blum (1978), science becomes pseudoscience when “the bias displayed by scientists reaches such extraordinary proportions that their relentless pursuit of verification leads them to commit major errors of reasoning” (pp. 12-13).

• Temporal changes

The origin of these individual deficits, be it genes, culture, family, or some combination, changes with the times.

• Educability

Deficit thinking focuses on four purposes of education that attempt to remediate individual deficit through description, explanation, prediction and prescription.

• Heterodoxy

Dissent has played and continues to play a critical role in the evolution of deficit thinking. When teachers operate within in a discourse of deficit, students suffer.
Teachers who “blame the victim” in attempts to justify the achievement gap are operating within a deficit discourse that denies the importance of culture. Learning is undeniably culture bound, and both students and teachers are products of cultures that provide contexts for teaching and learning (Chamberlain, 2005; Gay, 2000; Nieto 1999). Zeichner (1993) suggested that teachers, largely White and female, are not well-prepared to teach the increasingly diverse student population, and Futrell et al. (2003) confirmed these findings when they reported that 80% of teachers surveyed did not feel equipped to teach diverse learners. Unfortunately, a cultural style that is not principally White and middle class can signal deficit, not difference, to mainstream educators.

The Impact of Deficit Thinking on Achievement

Teachers in public schools are predominantly White, female, and middle class, and evidence indicates that teachers are less understanding of behaviors that are not part of their own cultural experience (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Lambert, Puig, Rowan, Lyubansky, & Winfrey, 1999). Teachers seem to prefer students most like themselves. Through the use of teacher interviews and descriptive data with first and fourth grade teachers, Washington (1982) investigated the establishment bias theory (Bowles & Gintis, 1973). The establishment bias theory suggests that those in authority express a preference for those most similar to themselves. For example, Black female teachers, according to this theory, should prefer Black female students. The results of this study confirmed the establishment bias theory. However, all teachers, both Black and White, perceived African American students more negatively than they perceived White students. Findings indicated that “schooling rewards neatness, conformity, concepts of beauty or appearance, attitudes, language, and behavior that
are culturally defined by the White middle-class female--regardless of the race or gender of the person in the establishment role” (p. 69). These findings suggest that teachers prefer students who exhibit traits that symbolize school success, regardless of whether the student is Black or White. Those students most different from the establishment, most unlike the teachers themselves, were viewed the most negatively. Teachers, both Black and White, viewed students of color most negatively; difference resulted in deficit assumptions and understandings about students of color. Other researchers have also found that schools and teachers tend to favor White students over students of other racial/ethnic backgrounds (Delpit, 1995; Ferguson, 1998; Fine, Weis, Addelston, & Marusza, 1997; McIntyre, 1997).

Researchers point out that there is a specific African American behavioral style (Hale-Benson, 1986; Hilliard, 1992). This African American style includes overlapping speech, candor, animation, rhythmic presentation style, cadence variation, and interactions marked by physical expression (Hale-Benson, 1986). These behaviors contrast with the linear conversations, deference to mainstream points of authority, and presence of impulse control found in White communities (Irvine, 1990). Some have suggested that overrepresentation may result from teacher preference (Artiles, Trent, Hoffman-Kipp, & Lopez-Torres, 2000; Hilliard, 1992). Research also suggests that teachers set apart and refer students perceived as different, difficult to teach or those exhibiting poor social skills (Bowman, 1988; Butler, 1993; Rist, 1970; Soodak & Podell, 1994). Others suggest that discrepancies in student achievement result from miscommunication between cultures (Allen & Boykin 1992; Boykin, 1978; Ferguson, 1998; Heath, 1983; Rist, 1970).

Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, and Bridgest (2003) examined teacher perceptions of African American cultural movement styles. Findings suggested that cultural movement styles
do indeed impact teacher perceptions. Regardless of race, teachers perceived all students with African American movement styles, both Black and White, as more aggressive and more likely to need special education services. A number of significant conclusions can be drawn from this investigation. First, these findings suggest that teachers did equate difference with deficit. Second, teacher response to difference was to seek outside assistance through special education services because teachers felt unprepared to respond to students of color. Third, a multitude of factors including race and culture appeared to act in complex ways to influence teacher perceptions.

Social class may also influence teacher assumptions and contribute to understandings about disability and deficit. Early research by Anyon (1988) suggested that teachers of upper class students capitalized on student interest and culture, but paid little attention to the interests of the working class. In an examination of lower and regular track classes at two middle-America high schools, Page (1987) witnessed what she termed “social differentiation.” The schools in this investigation, Marshall and Southmoor, were similar in most respects; both were good schools, both had experienced teachers, and income levels in both schools were relatively the same. At Marshall, however, only about 40% of parents attended college and fewer Marshall parents’ had professional occupations. At Southmoor, 60% of parents had attended college. Page determined that teacher perceptions that influenced student placement in specific curriculum tracks were based on school culture, community, and social class. The culture of the school determined teachers’ perceptions that, in turn, created a picture of the social class of a typical student. Social differentiation occurred when a curriculum was designed to meet the needs of a typical student of a particular social class. At Marshall, education was considered skill- and trade-based to meet the needs of “blue-collar kids,” while kids at Southmoor received a “heavenly,” college
preparatory education. Page found that school culture paired with stereotypical, class-based assumptions, had significant impact on individual students at both Marshall and Southmoor. Curriculum and track decisions at Marshall and Southmoor had little to do with individual students and more to do with the shared understandings of the teachers. Class-based assumptions created a common discourse that reinforced class stereotypes and resulted in limited opportunities for some students. According to Page,

> while faculty members at Marshall and Southmoor perceive social class distinctions in students, build educational programs that take selected sociocultural differences into account, and thereby provide for their revivification, teachers’ perceptions are circumscribed by the ethos of each school. (p. 17)

Unfortunately, individual students did not always fare well at either Marshall or Southmoor. A discourse of deficit played a critical, mediating role in shaping teachers’ assumptions at both of the schools. Lower track students at both schools were characterized by one teacher as “your, you know, your basic bottom” (p. 94).

Assumptions about social class and deficit influenced White and Black teachers somewhat differently in a study by Morris (2005). Morris found that teachers, both Black and White, interacted with White students by responding to a web of elements linking race, class, and other local contextual factors. In this investigation located within a predominantly minority school, whiteness appeared to signal to the White teachers particularly, that these students were impoverished, unfortunate and “low class,” what Hartigan (1977) termed “white trash” (p. 317). Contrary to expectations, whiteness did not signify privilege to these White teachers. These White teachers linked ability with class to create a deficit view of these students. Because of this connection, little effort or attention was paid to these students. Black teachers, on the other hand, viewed White students as “middle class.” Black teachers had greater expectations for these White students and treated them more positively than did the White teachers. At least for the
Black teachers in this study, whiteness alone, regardless of circumstance or living condition, did seem to connote higher status. This study by Morris shows the ways in which race, class, and ability intertwine and work in combination. This combination of factors signified deficit to the White teachers, but just the opposite to the Black teachers. Specifically, the same students provoked quite different reactions from Black and White teachers.

Latino students and their families also feel the effects of deficit thinking. Brown and Souto-Manning (2008) explored the discourses at work within a college-educated Puerto Rican family with two children, Teresa and Kevin, living in South Carolina. The investigators found that teachers were quick to blame previous schooling experiences in Puerto Rico for the difficulties Teresa was currently having in South Carolina. The schools expected Teresa and Kevin to assimilate into American culture, and dismissed their Spanish cultural heritage. The Puerto Rican schools and the Spanish language were both devalued and considered deficient. As a result, Teresa and Kevin lost much of their first language. Although the parents were saddened and surprised by the loss of language, they became convinced that English was the only measure of success. They too began to believe that embracing English-only was superior to English-plus. The impact of deficit constructions was powerful in this investigation, and highlighted the ways in which difference became deficit to these mainstream educators. In contrast, teachers who capitalize on student culture boost student achievement and transform schooling in a positive way.

*Deficit Thinking and Student Behavior*

Unfortunately, disproportionality in discipline is nothing new. In 1975, The Children’s Defense Fund reported that Black students were suspended more often than White students. In
fact, in secondary schools Black students were suspended three times more often than White students. Since the Gun-Free Schools Act was passed by Congress in 1994, 94% of public schools have adopted zero tolerance policies (Johnson, Boydon, & Pittz, 2001). Noguera (1995) suggested that these policies have contributed to disproportionality in discipline by making it easier to suspend and expel students. Watts and Erevelles (2004) suggested that these zero tolerance policies perpetuate, through oppressive social conditions, the exclusion of students outside the mainstream by capitalizing on fears surrounding perceptions of marginalized students. In addition, Casella (2003) contended that students perceived as outsiders are believed to be potentially “dangerous.”

Watts and Erevelles (2004) and Noguera (2003) suggested that teachers may be conditioned by cultural norms to believe that Black males are in need of greater control than their White classmates. Stuart Hall (1985) described what the term “Black” represents when he discussed the possibilities for transforming meaning through ideological struggle:

For example it is precisely because “black” is the term which connotes the most despised, the dispossessed, the unenlightened, the uncivilized, the uncultivated, the scheming, the incompetent, that is can be contested, transformed and invested with a positive ideological value. (p. 112)

The portrayal of African American males in the media also presents a powerful message and perpetuates this discourse. Cornel West (1993) eloquently described the Black male “machismo” in Race Matters:

For most young black men, power is acquired by stylizing their bodies over space and time in such a way that their bodies reflect their uniqueness and provoke fear in others. To be “bad” is good not simply because it subverts the language of the dominant white culture but also because it imposes a unique kind of order for young black men on their own distinctive chaos and solicits an attention that makes others pull back with some trepidation. This young black male style is a form of self-identification and resistance in a hostile culture; it also is an instance of machismo identity ready for violent encounters. (p. 128)
Students are marginalized by deficit assumptions that result in exclusionary policies directed at students that lie outside the mainstream, students with disabilities and students of color.

Teacher Assumptions and Disciplinary Consequences

Surprisingly, student behaviors in schools that result in suspension are generally not in response to violence, but are in response to behaviors that are considered disruptive based on teacher assumptions. Disruptions that result in suspensions frequently occur without any physical violence or obvious verbal abuse. In a study investigating discipline patterns in an inner-city school, Bowditch (1993) discovered that the majority of students of color referred to the dean’s office were referred for non-violent infractions and received exclusionary discipline. The students that teachers assumed to be troublemakers were more likely to be referred. Skiba et al. (2002), investigating one year of disciplinary data in an urban middle school, found similar results and concluded that poor, minority students, or those struggling academically are primarily suspended for nonviolent offenses.

Teacher assumptions and the way in which disruptions are understood may contribute to disproportionality. To examine these assumptions, Vavrus and Cole (2002) investigated “disciplinary moments” within an urban high school. They explored the events that led teachers to remove students from their classrooms. Vavrus and Cole found “that removing a student from class is a highly contextualized decision based on subtle race and gender relations that cannot be adequately addressed in school discipline policies” (p. 1.). They also found that the way in which teachers define disruptive behavior varies from teacher to teacher and from context to context; it is subjective to be sure. Ethnographic evidence suggested that a single disruptive event resulted in the eventual removal of a student from the classroom. Each student believed “I didn’t do
nuthin,” in part because the single event that lead to expulsion seemed so arbitrary and insignificant (p. 1). Vavrus and Cole contend it was a fear of loss of control on the part of the teacher that led to the students’ removal. These decisions based on subjective interpretations of student behavior rooted within deficit discourse marginalize students of color and exacerbate disproportionality.

Vavrus and Cole (2002) determined that teachers’ decisions to remove a student from class varied from student to student and teacher to teacher. Ferguson (2000), in her ethnographic investigation of Black boys, also found that institutional responses to behavior result from teacher assumptions about race and culture that are indeed subjective and deficit based. Ferguson described the punishing room at Rosa Parks Elementary School as an in-school suspension room filled with Black males. She maintained that decisions made to place students in the punishing room were based on teachers’ “perceptions of student appearance, behavior, and social background” (pp. 53-54). The 25 fifth and sixth grade African American boys that Ferguson followed were divided into two groups: the schoolboys and the troublemakers. The troublemakers had been suspended out of school at least once for fighting, obscenity, or weapons violations. The schoolboys had never been suspended, but did occasionally receive a referral. Ferguson never predicted that these students would have so much in common, but as the school year progressed Ferguson witnessed the transformation of schoolboys into troublemakers. The schoolboys appeared to be guilty by association, and as a result were more likely to be sent to the punishing room than either females or students of other races. The constant portrayal of Black English as inferior also had a troubling effect on these students, who took pride in their cultural heritage. Taken together, the culture, the behavior, and race of these students created a portrait that threatened those in authority. Teachers responded to what they assumed to be deficit by
removing these students from class and sending them to the punishing room as a form of control.

Skiba et al. (2002) emphasized the significance of teacher assumptions:

The majority of reasons for which white students are referred more frequently seem to be based on an objective event (e.g., smoking, vandalism) that leaves a permanent product. Reasons for black referrals to the office, on the other hand, are infractions (e.g., loitering, excessive noise) that would seem to require a good deal more subjective judgment on the part of the referring agent. Even the most serious of the reasons for office referrals among black students, threat, is dependent on perception of threat by the staff making the referral. (p. 334)

Social class also effects the behavioral expectations of teachers, who view ethnic and lower class students as more deviant than middle- or upper-class Whites (Sbarra & Pianta, 2001). Boykin (1978) contended that it is not just the differences in culture but the differences in status that create negative perceptions for teachers. Culturally responsive educators are needed to more accurately perceive the difference between disobedience and enthusiasm, between disrespect and self-confidence, and between aggression and assertiveness.

*Teacher Race and Disciplinary Consequences*

An investigation to examine the relationship between school segregation and the disproportionate suspension rates of Black students was conducted by Eitle and Eitle in 2004. Although the focus of this study was on school- and district-level variables, findings indicated that the race and educational level of teachers may have impacted the suspension imbalance. Schools with more educated and more experienced teachers, most of them White, had more disproportionate suspensions. This investigation confirmed the earlier findings of Meier et al. (1989) who found that districts with a greater proportion of Black teachers had lower rates of disproportionate suspensions. These findings suggest that White teachers are, at the very least,
less understanding and less tolerant of students who exhibit behaviors that lie outside the mainstream. Black teachers, not surprisingly, may be more tolerant and less fearful of Black students.

Although research indicates that Black student behavior is generally rated higher by Black teachers than by White teachers (Alexander, Entwisle, & Thompson, 1987; Ehrenberg, Goldhaber, & Brewer, 1995; Farkas, Grobe, Sheehan, & Shuan, 1990), researchers have been hesitant to suggest White teacher bias. One explanation has been Oppositional Culture Theory. This theory contends that peer group pressure encourages antisocial behavior among Black youth, and accounts for the culture clash between Black students and White teachers in public schools (Ogbu, 1991). To investigate the possibility of White bias in discipline, Downey and Pribesh (2004) analyzed race matching effects among kindergartners. They found that race does indeed matter. Black students were consistently rated as poorer classroom citizens than White students. When students were matched with teachers by race, this finding did not persist and Black students were actually perceived to behave more appropriately than their White counterparts. Because unfavorable teacher ratings of Black students began as early as kindergarten, Downey and Pribesh dismissed oppositional culture theory as a probable explanation. The authors concluded that White bias was responsible for the unfavorable perceptions of Black students, not oppositional culture theory.

To explore the ways in which Black teachers specifically respond to the behaviors of Black students, Monroe and Obidah (2004) conducted a qualitative study of one African American teacher in an urban middle school. Their findings concluded that cultural synchronization between teacher and student does make a difference. This Black teacher used specific patterns of cultural humor to regulate student behavior and express behavioral
expectations. Her style of humor was important because she used it to bridge the gap between student and teacher. She understood and appreciated the backgrounds of her students, she was able to capitalize on cultural knowledge to make learning more relevant, and her management style solidified her standing with students in her classroom. This study demonstrates that discipline is most effective when it is respectful and responsive to student culture and behavioral style. Unfortunately, deficit assumptions about behavior, family background, and cultural style have too often led to disciplinary consequences that marginalize and disenfranchise students of color.

A Traditional Special Education Discourse

Sometimes seemingly obvious disabilities are never identified, and the consequences for the person and his or her family, as well as the larger society, are tragic. Sometimes disabilities are identified, but special education is not provided, squandering opportunities for the child’s development. (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2000, Exceptional Learners)

The field of special education has grown out of the disciplines of science, medicine, and psychology. To this day, the field continues to maintain a positivist stance (Brantlinger, 1997; Gallagher, 1998; Skrtic, 1991). Special education focuses attention on the student in isolation, with little consideration given to social, cultural, or political influences. This deficit view of students with disabilities still persists in public schools today. Mutua and Smith (2006) assert that special education teachers still characterize their roles in medical terms, and the majority of special education textbooks used in teacher preparation programs continue to promote the medical model (Brantlinger, 2006). The assumptions that support the special education discourse were clearly outlined by Brantlinger in 1997 and still persist today. These include the following:

- Disabilities are innate conditions.
- Diversity is problematic.
• All students of a certain age should meet grade level statistical norms.

• Students who lie outside the norm are eligible for labels, such as learning disabled or emotionally disturbed.

• Learning follows a clearly defined linear pathway.

• Traditional, academically oriented subject matter curriculums are best for most students.

• Specialized, intensive and individualized instruction and interventions are necessary for disabled students to achieve normalcy.

• Labeling and sorting is inevitable in schools because competition is natural, fair and expected.

• Instruction/interventions for students with disabilities are most effective in separate settings.

• Students with disabilities are more successful when taught by special education teachers.

• Schools are politically neutral institutions. They do little harm and know what’s best.

Although some would argue that these assumptions have changed the lives of disabled students and their families in positive ways, not everyone agrees. Reid and Valle (2004) suggested that special education is the response that society has constructed to deal with children that are not successful in school. Reid and Valle maintained that educators sidestep responsibility for student failure when disability is medically constructed.
Teacher Referrals

A traditional special education discourse has impacted teacher understandings and decisions that have led to significant numbers of special education placements. Teacher referrals nearly always lead to testing, and testing, in turn, very often results in special education placement (Algozzine, Christenson, & Ysseldyke, 1982; Algozzine, Ysseldyke, & Christenson, 1983; Artiles & Trent, 1994; Mehan et al., 1986). In fact, 90% of referred students will be placed (Harry, Klingner, Sturges & Moore, 2002). According to Harry and Klingner (2006), “If teachers do not refer, children will not be placed, and if teachers refer, the vast majority of the children referred will be placed in special education” (p. 97). The significance of teachers in the referral process that ultimately results in disproportionality cannot be underestimated.

According to Harry and Anderson (1994), Black students are twice as likely to be referred for special education services as White students. Some have suggested that over-referral occurs because teachers misunderstand and misinterpret students’ learning problems (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Chamberlain, 2005). Others assert that referrals are made by teachers who select those students who seem “different” (Bowman, 1988; Butler, 1993; McIntyre, 1990; Rist, 1970; Skrtic, 2003; Soodak & Podell, 1994; Utley & Obiakor, 2001). Research also suggests that referrals are made by teachers who appear unable to manage students who are louder or more aggressive than the typical White student (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson, & Wu, 2006). Research also indicates that teacher subjective perceptions and expectations primarily influence their referral decisions (Lloyd, Kauffman, Landrum, & Row, 1991; McIntyre, 1990; Moore, 2002; Neal et al., 2003;).

In 2002, Moore conducted an investigation of African American teachers and their referral decisions. This investigation is significant because it showed that teachers, regardless of
race, make referral decisions based on subjective assessments of student characteristics such as race, behavior, and achievement motivation. Although the African American teachers in this investigation showed passionate regard for these students and a deep commitment to their African American roots, they nevertheless made referral decisions shaped by dominant mainstream discourses about the qualities and traits that characterize successful students.

Teachers also appear to harbor negative feelings and stereotypes about the families of students who are referred for special education services. In interviews conducted during the referral processes, Harry et al. (2002) discovered that school personnel, in response to students’ ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic background, assumed they came from dysfunctional homes. In addition, many also used this assumption to decide whether these parents were reliable, responsible, or caring.

Minority students, although referred and placed in special education programs at disproportionate rates, are underrepresented in gifted and talented programs. In a study conducted by Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, and Holloway (2005), findings indicated that students’ ethnicity does impact teacher referral decisions. Elementary school teachers, the majority European American, were presented with almost identical student vignettes describing gifted children. The only difference among the vignettes was the ethnicity of the children. Subjective bias toward African American students seemed to make the difference, and teachers reported that they were less likely to refer African American students for gifted programs. Researchers suggested that lowered expectations by European American teachers in this study, coupled with lower expectations that had been found for poor students in previous studies (Mutua, 2001) may explain the results of this study. Evidence further indicates that teachers, both Black and White, are more likely to refer students from ethnic groups different from their
own, and White children are more likely to be referred for special education services by their parents (Riccio, Ochoa, Garza, & Nero, 2003; Tobias, Cole, Zibrin, & Bodlakova, 1982). Hosp and Reschly (2004) maintained that a cultural mismatch between students of color and White teachers places students of color at particular risk for being identified and placed outside the general classroom.

Results in an early study by Emihovich (1983) linked teacher referral decisions to institutional racism. In this investigation, two students, Ricky (White) and Mark (Black), received dissimilar treatment by their kindergarten teacher. Ricky and Mark were bright and both were exhibiting behavioral difficulties in the classroom. The teacher recommended counseling for both boys because of their disruptive behavior. The researcher noted that Ricky was more troubled, but better able to behave in the classroom. The teacher was proactive in her interventions with Ricky and more tolerant of his misbehaviors. On the other hand, Mark was making improvements but the teacher failed to see these improvements. She subsequently referred Mark for the LA class, a class for emotionally disturbed students. The teacher’s recommendation held considerable weight and if Mark was “accepted” into the program, he would have to go to another school. In spite of outwardly preferential treatment for Ricky, the teacher did show concern for Mark and researchers found no evidence of racial animosity. Emihovich concluded that this differential treatment could be attributed to institutional racism:

The campaign to get Mark into the LA class was not orchestrated against him as an individual, but as a member of a class (a poor, black male from a broken home) with a highly suspect history of violence and limited potential for change. (p. 271)

Emihovich suggested that Mark signified a broader pathology: the angry, Black criminal male. Powerless to change society and feeling powerless to change Mark, the teacher sought outside assistance and special education services.
Placement Decisions

Although there is considerable research about teachers and the referral process, less is known about the ways in which teachers make decisions about setting and program placement. Research does indicate, however, that multiple factors such as economics, specific student behaviors, severity of disability, student cognitive abilities, and teacher characteristics do impact placement decisions (Glassberg, 1994; Kauffman, Cullinan, & Epstein, 1987; Kauffman, Hallahan, & Ford, 1998; Podell & Soodak, 1993; Trent & Artiles, 1995). Artiles and Trent (1994) contended that culturally and linguistically diverse students are disproportionately placed in more restrictive placement settings.

In 1993, Podell and Soodak investigated the relationship between teacher efficacy and referral and placement decisions. Teacher efficacy refers to the confidence teachers have in their own abilities to engender student success. In order for teachers to recommend less restrictive placement settings for disabled students, Podell and Soodak found that high levels of teacher efficacy were necessary. Frey (2002) found similar results about teacher efficacy when he explored the placement decisions of 350 special education teachers using vignettes describing a fourth grade boy. In these vignettes, the child’s socioeconomic status and race varied. Frey found that teachers who felt confident in the areas of classroom management and discipline were more likely to recommend students for less restrictive placement settings. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were recommended for more restrictive placement settings.

More recently, Allen (2002) conducted a qualitative investigation that examined specifically the complexity of the decision-making process in response to individual students with special needs. In her investigation that followed six elementary school students for four years, Allen found that teachers did genuinely work in what they considered to be the best
interests of students. Teachers relied on formal and informal sources of information, and willingly changed course when students struggled. As the investigation unfolded, Allen suggested that “decisions” would be better characterized as challenges to policies and procedures. For example, teachers were resistant to retention, and so would push for special education placement to avoid retention. Teachers were the critical factor; the closer the decision maker to the student, the better the placement decision for the child, given forced choices. Allen’s investigation highlighted the complexities of decision making, and the constraints that operate on teacher intentions and decisions. Allen praised educators for their perseverance, presented an authentic view of students, and encouraged greater student involvement in the special education process. In spite of good intentions, Allen concluded that “As much as the public longs for uniform policies (ending social promotion, establishing high standards, testing early and often), there are devastating human consequences to standardized ‘solutions.’ For these children, the best intentions of educators were not enough” (p. 39).

Instruction

The special education discourse continues to play a critical role in terms of student opportunity long after students have been referred. Instructional decisions that are prescriptive and remedial in nature result from a medical conception of disability. One study in particular, a portion of a larger thesis by Wright (2001), investigated the schooling experiences of an autistic student, Zachary. Data indicated that Zachary’s teachers and aides went to considerable effort to accommodate Zachary so that he would not exhibit worry or stress. Assignments were reduced and modified, and activities were discontinued at the first sign of student frustration. The data further indicated that teachers responded to Zachary in response to gendered and deficit norms.
The teachers treated Zachary differently; they modified his instruction and “mother[ed]” him. As a result, Zachary’s classmates mimicked teacher behaviors and positioned Zachary differently. Wright maintained that,” Discourses perpetuate social practices, and prejudices, positioning those they grasp in their clutches” (p. 13).

**Discourse as Coercion**

There is significant evidence indicating that schools capitalize on the special education discourse in order to persuade parents that special education labels, programs, settings, and instructional methods are best for their children. Valle and Aponte (2002) note that the “parent is expected to internalize the authoritative discourse [of special education]--the norm by which all other knowledge is judged” (p. 474). Valle, the professional, and Aponte, the parent, explored these relationships and provided a review of the literature on parent-professional collaboration in special education. Findings have consistently indicated that parent involvement is cursory and inauthentic to say the least. Legal requirements are met, but quality collaborative relationships are lacking (Mehan et al., 1986). In their review, Valle and Aponte found that special education professionals use professional jargon excessively and inappropriately (Rockowitz & Davison, 1979), pathologize parents (Lipsky, 1985; Sonnenschein, 1981), fail to assure parent understanding (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Harry, 1992; Hoff, Fenton, Yoshida, & Kaufman, 1978; Malekoff, Johnson, & Klappersack, 1991), and fail to achieve authentic parent involvement in decision making (Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995; Poland, Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & Mirkin, 1982; Sonnenschein, 1981). Parents are lead to believe that those who question the special education discourse are in effect questioning science, rationality and
empiricism. Valle and Aponte (2002) compared the authoritarian discourse of special education

to Foucault’s (1995) examination of power and knowledge:

The turning of real lives into writing . . . functions as a procedure of objectification and
subjection . . . the examination as the fixing, at once ritual and “scientific,” of individual
differences, as the pinning down of each individual in his own particularity . . . clearly
indicates the appearance of a new modality of power in which each individual receives as
his status his own individuality, and in which he is linked by his status to the features, the
measurements, the gaps, the “marks” that characterize him and make him a “case.” (p.
192)

A traditional special education discourse links knowledge with power and is an authoritative
force that parents are at best only minimally equipped to navigate.

The special education assumptions outlined by Brantlinger (1997) earlier were palpable
in the discussions about Derek. Although most teachers liked Derek, they still viewed his
behavior and cultural style as problematic. Teachers, confident in their abilities to make
decisions in Derek’s best interest, maintained that Derek could only make progress in a special
education classroom taught by special education teachers employing reductionist learning
strategies. The unit of analysis was always Derek and teachers failed to recognize the ways in
which culture, politics, and society impact the schooling process. A traditional special education
discourse is very much alive and well in public schools.

A Discourse of Liberalism

Racialized social systems are societies that allocate differential economic, political,
social, and even psychological rewards to groups along racial lines; lines that are socially
constructed. (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, p.474)

Classical liberalism is based on the principles of individualism, competition, and reward
based on personal work ethic (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1987). The proverbs below succinctly
illuminate the tenets of the liberal discourse and the ways in which these discourses permeate our thinking:

- *God helps those who help themselves.*
- *Stand on your own two feet.*
- *No one remembers who was in second place.*
- *Genius is one percent inspiration and 99% perspiration.*
- *Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps.*
- *Where there’s a will there’s a way.*

Schools that are positioned within a discourse of liberalism contend that they are fair and equitable institutions, and assert a neutral perspective. Without any acknowledgment of the social, cultural, and political impediments, responsibility for student success and failure depend upon individual effort, character, and biological capacity (Olssen et al., 2004). Teachers were quick to speak about the value of a personal work ethic in conversations about Derek; the evidence of a liberal perspective was unmistakable. According to Olssen et al. (2004),

> Liberals see individuals as “self-creations” constituted by their free and rational choices. Such discourses have worked to suppress the reality of the social in the presentation of the individual as a free, unified, and autonomous being. Social positioning is understood to be achieved quite independently of the influence of other people and structured barriers. (p. 101)

A discourse of liberalism fails to recognize or grant significance to social positioning or the social construction of individuals; gender, race, class, and ethnicity are virtually ignored from this perspective. Young (1997) eloquently described the way in which a liberal discourse obfuscates the power of groups, in this particular case, groups of women, in order to circumvent issues of oppression:

> This individualist ideology, however, in fact obscures oppression. Without conceptualizing women as a group in some sense, it is not possible to conceptualize
oppression as a systematic, structured, institutional process. If we obey the injunction to think of people only as individuals, then the disadvantages and exclusions we call oppressions reduce to individuals in one of two ways. Either we blame the victims and say that disadvantaged people’s choices and capacities render them less competitive, or we attribute their disadvantage to the attitudes of other individuals, who for whatever reason don’t “like” the disadvantaged ones. In either case structural and political ways to address and rectify the disadvantage are written out of the discourse, leaving individuals to wrestle with their bootstraps. The importance of being able to talk about disadvantage and oppression in terms of groups exists just as much for those oppressed through race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and the like as through gender. (p. 17)

When conversation about the social and political construction of group identity is silenced, nothing remains but a liberal discourse. Schools find it difficult to address issues of race and disability directly, and instead adopt a colorblind perspective (Castagno, 2008; Holme, 2004; Lewis, 2003; Revilla, Wells, & Peshkin, 1991). What results is a structure of schooling grounded in a liberal perspective.

A discourse of liberalism persists in schools and is promoted by predominantly female, White, middle-class teachers. Christine Sleeter (1996) suggested that these White middle-class teachers bring their White middle-class values with them to the classroom, and these perspectives support the protestant work ethic and a discourse of liberalism. In addition, Sleeter contended that most teachers are unwilling to consider institutional racism as a plausible explanation for student failure. Instead, they blame the individual for lack of effort or personal deficiency without considering the institutional barriers that limit opportunity.

Colorblindness

A liberal discourse that focuses on individual effort works hand in hand with the notion of colorblindness. In fact, colorblindness sustains the discourse of liberalism. To ignore the injustices perpetuated by racism, one must, within a liberal discourse, maintain a colorblind posture. James Banks (2001) explained that,
a statement such as “I don’t see color” reveals a privileged position that refuses to legitimize racial identifications that are very important to people of color and that are often used to justify inaction and perpetuation of the status quo. (p. 12)

The racism that has prevailed since the civil rights era has been defined as colorblind racism by Bonilla-Silva (2003), and is situated within a liberal discourse. Colorblind racism rests on the following assumptions:

- Denial of discrimination
- Application of liberal principles to racial matters
- Use of culture to explain racial status

Bonilla-Silva (2001) contended that colorblind racism is more covert, but no less pervasive than the more overt discrimination that existed prior to the civil rights movement. When Brown v. Board of Education ruled that separate public schools for Blacks and Whites were unconstitutional, the discourse about race changed and moved underground. Challenges to institutional racism were no longer considered necessary, and racism became defined in terms of individual, aberrant acts of discrimination. As a result, any discussion of race leads to charges of “playing the race card” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Crenshaw (1977) agreed, and contended that ‘noticing race’ can have injurious outcomes.

Although colorblind racism denies the existence of discrimination, plenty of evidence exists to the contrary. Racism in the form of economic inequalities, residential segregation, and persistent discrimination along class lines persists today (Bobo, Kluegel, & Smith, 1997). When race is removed from the discrimination conversation, the focus on individual responsibility and the liberal discourse once again take center stage. Tatum (1999) and others (Bobo et al., 1997) have suggested that Whites equate colorblindness with freedom from prejudice, and Audre Lorde (1982) has suggested that colorblindness allows Whites to believe they can “conquer it [racism and discrimination] by ignoring it” (p. 81). It is obviously not that simple or straightforward.
Lewis (2003) suggested that colorblindness has achieved “common sense” status among the public and in educational settings. As a result, discussions about race are rarely contemplated. Lewis (2002) defined this racism as

a set of narratives and understandings that are pervasive throughout the culture and which have broad-scale impact both inside and beyond schooling. Thus, drawing on recent theoretical writing on colorblind ideology pushes us to think about the interests served by colorblind discourse, rather than seeing it merely as a deficiency in how educators understand what is taking place in their school. (p. 28)

Schofield (1982) was one of the first to investigate the notion of colorblindness through a multi-year, ethnographic study of a middle school in the northeastern United States. Schofield discovered that the colorblind perspective was unmistakably at work throughout this community. Teachers asserted that they did not see race and insisted that students did not notice race either, in spite of the fact that students indicated otherwise. Although professing a colorblind perspective, racial stereotypes linked White with success and Black with academic weakness (Schofield, 1986). Discussions about race were off limits and any mention of race was considered “racist.” According to Schofield, this colorblind perspective initially worked to minimize discomfort and embarrassment among teachers and to reduce overt racial conflict. But, in the long run it caused more disciplinary action against Black students and maintained the status quo by failing to capitalize on Black culture.

Ignoring race through colorblind discourse also fails to address the unmerited advantages enjoyed by Whites. Revilla, Wells, and Holme (2004) suggested that a colorblind discourse situates whiteness as the norm. Furthermore, colorblindness fails to explain why those of color are so disadvantaged. Revilla et al. conducted interviews with students and educators more than 20 years after they graduated from desegregated high schools in the 1970s. A colorblind discourse was evident in these schools and succeeded in silencing any discussions about race.
Graduates indicated that everybody got along, but at a price. One graduate noted that the refusal to discuss or recognize race, “left many things unsaid, many misunderstandings unresolved, and many feelings deeply hurt” (p. 291). The investigators maintained that when discussion and recognition of race are avoided, whiteness goes unchallenged; “that which is not white is seen as not only different but also deficient” (p. 291). From the educators’ viewpoint, colorblindness served as a way to avoid racial conflict, and as a means to make connections across color lines. Peshkin (1991) found similar results in his investigation of a small town high school, Riverview. Peshkin explored the high school and the community to gain understandings about the role of ethnicity and the impact of colorblind ideology in their daily lives. Similar to results found by Revilla et al. (2004), teachers denied the importance of group membership and espoused a liberal discourse of individualism. Teachers were proud of their colorblindness. Indeed, teachers believed that they were not discriminatory precisely because they were colorblind. In addition, teachers believed they were protecting students from prejudice and discrimination through colorblindness.

More recent studies conducted by Lewis (2001) confirmed previous results. In her year-long ethnographic study of a suburban, predominantly White school, Lewis found that school and community members outwardly denied the significance of race and claimed colorblindness. In spite of this, however, “racialized practices and color-conscious understandings” (Lewis, 2001, p. 781) influenced their most basic decisions, such as where they lived, who they played with, and what television shows they watched. These understandings also contributed to and perpetuated deficit views about non-Whites in this community. Lewis found that Whites in her investigation gave little consideration to their own “racialness.” Although race influenced the decisions Whites made in their own lives, they continued to maintain a colorblind perspective.
Lewis contended that colorblindness is so accepted because it capitalizes on Martin Luther King Jr.’s (1963) famous “I have a dream” speech in which he expressed hope that, “my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” Martin Luther King Jr. was clearly not colorblind, but he was well aware of the discriminatory practices at work against African Americans. Colorblindness that disregards institutional racism also fails to recognize the significance that race plays in individual lives and cultures. Colorblindness is dangerous because it drives racism underground and sustains the status quo.

Racial minorities have been the target of attention when it comes to issues of race relations. Most Whites think race and racialized identities refer to others, and not themselves. As a result, many suggest that Whites need to investigate their own racial identities (Andersen, 2003; Lewis, 2004; McIntyre, 1997). Because of our infatuation with colorblindness, whiteness is not easy to study and remains relatively unexamined (Lewis, 2004). Lewis notes that, “Part of the privilege associated with whiteness is, in fact, the ability not to think about race at all, not to take any notice whatsoever of its role in daily life” (p. 641). Lewis recognized the challenges researchers face when investigating whiteness, but contended that to do so is essential for understanding the racialized discourses that permeate schooling.

Silence about race is noticeably evident within all levels of schooling (Boler, 2004; Pollock, 2004; Schultz, Buck, & Niesz, 2006). Castagno (2008) discovered in one urban school district that whiteness was legitimized and maintained through silence about race and racism. Castagno was interested in two questions primarily: How and why are issues of race silenced in schools and how do these silences legitimate whiteness? Castagno discovered that race was silenced in several ways, which included teacher silence about race and in response to student
questions, and teachers’ use of coded language to disguise racial meaning. Instead of talking about race, teachers spoke about culture, equality and equity, and difference and deficit. Race talk made these teachers very uncomfortable and was not part of the accepted discourse within these schools. Silence about race perpetuated the colorblind discourse, unconscious biases, and White privilege.

A liberal discourse, and the notion of colorblindness that supports it, conceals the real issues that create and sustain inequity within school settings. Teachers who are “blind” to the systemic practices within schools that limit opportunities for disabled students and students of color must look beyond a discourse of liberalism and adopt a more empowering and liberating perspective.

A Discourse of Teacher Professionalism

The invention of 21st century schools that can educate all children well rests, first and foremost, upon the development of a highly qualified and committed teaching force. (Linda Darling-Hammond, 1996, p. 5)

The professionals working with Derek certainly felt that they, based upon their educational experience and education, were in the best position to make quality decisions about his schooling and future opportunities. Derek’s teachers were operating within what I consider to be a discourse of teacher professionalism. Because I am a classroom teacher and my perspective is that of practitioner rather than policymaker, I relied primarily on the Five Core Propositions created by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS, 2011) to represent a discourse of teacher professionalism that I encounter every day. These propositions include the following:
- Proposition 1: Teachers are Committed to Students and Their Learning
- Proposition 2: Teachers Know the Subjects They Teach and How to Teach Those Subjects to Students
- Proposition 3: Teachers are Responsible for Managing and Monitoring Student Learning
- Proposition 4: Teachers Think Systematically about Their Practice and Learn from Experience
- Proposition 5: Teachers are Members of Learning Communities

Although these propositions are open to interpretation, they do paint a picture of teacher professionalism that most public school teachers recognize.

Accountability concerns such as national standards, “No Child Left Behind” and high-stakes testing, are strong forces within a discourse of teacher professionalism. The Five Core Propositions (NBPTS) that are discussed in the article “What Teachers Should Know and Be Able To Do” (NBPTS, 2002) are tied directly to accountability. Talbert and McLaughlin (1994), in a multi-year study of 16 diverse high schools, reported that levels of teacher professionalism are dependent on the local teacher community, particularly at the department level. Findings indicated that teachers who are part of strong professional communities exhibit higher levels of teacher professionalism along the following three dimensions:

1. Technical culture
   - Curriculum standards
   - Subject instruction
   - Relations with students
   - School goals
2. Service ethic
   - Caring for students
   - Responsibility for all students and their learning

3. Professional commitment
   - Teaching
   - Subject matter
   - Professional growth

Results indicated that teacher professionalism was socially negotiated within local, departmental, and school culture. The tensions that existed among these levels of professionalism impacted opportunities for students. Talbert and McLaughlin observed tensions between technical culture (accountability) and service ethic specifically. The findings suggested that a strong technical culture may mean higher expectations for all students. However, a strong technical culture may also mean lowered expectations for some students, based on deficit thinking. Specifically, one math department in this investigation embraced a strong technical culture characterized by traditional instructional methods and absolute academic standards. As a result, teachers were torn between a strong technical culture and the responsibilities they felt to meet the needs of diverse learners. Teachers struggle on a daily basis to meet the contradictory demands put forward by the professional educator discourse. The tensions that result impact student achievement, student opportunity, and teacher efficacy.

Inclusion teachers face similar accountability challenges: ‘Why should teachers hold all students accountable to the same standards when all students are not the same?’ Abu el-Haj and Rubin (2009), in their ethnographic investigation of teachers in inclusion and detracked settings (Abu el-Haj, 2006; Rubin, 2007, 2008), investigated the tensions that result as a consequence of
inclusion. Rubin’s study focused on detracking in three public high schools, and Abu el-Haj investigated middle school inclusion classes. Their findings indicated that although teachers were generally supportive of inclusion and detracking policies, they struggled to put these policies into practice. Inclusion, according to Abu el-Haj and Rubin, is based on the democratic principle of equitable educational opportunities for all, combined with a commitment to the value of diversity and collaboration. Teachers appeared torn between high standards and the need to accommodate diverse learners. Although inclusion may be an attempt to level the playing field in terms of educational opportunity, the rarely contemplated issues of ability, standards, and structural inequality seriously challenge the inclusion movement and frustrate practicing teachers. Abu el-Haj and Rubin contend that these current policies must be reexamined and rearticulated in order to realize the promise of inclusion and detracking in schools.

Accountability and test scores have become the lifeline of American education. Yet, not a single mission statement I have read to date champions the value of high-stakes testing. Mission statements continue to advocate lifelong learning, respect for diversity, student empowerment, and personal responsibility. To better understand the impact of high-stakes testing, Booher-Jennings (2005) explored an urban elementary school’s response to the Texas Accountability System. Her findings were significant. The Brickland Independent School District published teachers test scores, reinforcing the belief that good teachers are synonymous with high test scores. It was so important for the district to be viewed positively by the public that teachers used what Booher-Jennings described as “educational triage” to present the appearance of improvement and success. This “educational triage” capitalized on the loopholes in the Texas Accountability System. Special education students and mobile students were excluded from the testing subset and those students who were considered a testing liability were
referred for special education services. High test scores were a driving force in this school district and, as a result, teachers’ attentions focused primarily on “bubble kids.” These were the students that teachers felt stood a reasonable chance of passing the tests with sustained teacher attention and intervention. Because of this prevailing discourse, Booher-Jennings contended that it was illogical to expend time and attention on students with considerably less likelihood for success. As a result, accountability was most detrimental to students who needed intervention the most. These findings indicate that data are not necessarily impartial, objective, or neutral. Students considered less likely to succeed were given little attention and left to sink or swim on their own.

Accountability demands have consequences for teachers too; accountability impacts the ways in which teachers perform their duties. Webb (2006) found that teachers, in response to scrutiny and surveillance, resorted to fabricated performances to satisfy accountability directives. These performances served to maintain and perpetuate institutionally “correct” discourse (p. 212). Webb noted that, “these fabrications were part of a hierarchical system of meaning within the schools” (p. 211). Teachers acting in political ways used these performances to gain cultural capital within the school. Through interviews and observations at two low performing schools, Webb found that teachers continued these performances even when direct threats and surveillance were removed. With so much effort put into these performances, less time was left for instruction and student engagement. In addition, what counts as important for students is left unexamined and the realities of schooling are not addressed; the status quo is maintained.

The results of accountability efforts can have deleterious effects, particularly for disabled students and students of color. Giroux (1985) observed that schools spend considerable energy on controlling and managing students. Giroux refers to this as the “discourse of management and
control” (p. 24). Operating within this discourse, students’ cultures are devalued and the behaviors of teachers are controlled in order to provide consistency across settings and generate high test scores. Quality education and equitable opportunities for all students require much more than accountability and standards, surveillance, and control. Quality and equity in educational settings require a commitment to radical reform that creates and sustains opportunities for success without fear, punishment, and oppression. Power for good must replace power as repression. According to Foucault (1991),

> We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it “excludes,” it “represses,” it “censors,” it “abstracts,” it “masks,” it “conceals.” In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (p. 194)

Teachers are faced with the impossible task of ensuring that all students meet the same arbitrary standards, while at the same time meeting the obligations of the Five Core Propositions (NBPTS) in order to maintain their professional status. The tensions created between these two, often contradictory ambitions, are significant.

**Summary**

Regardless of how it is determined, disproportionality remains a significant problem in public schools today. Dominant discourses that influence teacher understandings come in many forms. Based on experiences with students like Derek in inclusion settings, four dominant discourses were identified and examined through a review of the literature. Evidence suggests that teachers respond to a variety of discourses that negatively impact opportunities for disabled students and students of color.
Chapter 3 presents the methodology and theoretical frameworks used in this study to investigate the impact of discourse on the understandings and decisions of inclusion teachers.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the discourses that shape the understandings of inclusion teachers and influence the decisions they make about their students. Teacher decisions have powerful consequences on students. By listening to the voices of inclusion teachers, I hoped to gain a better understanding of the ways in which discourse influences teacher understandings and practice. Ultimately, teacher decisions, ranging from those that are restrictive and confining to those that are liberating and empowering, influence the educational futures of all students, including disabled students and students of color. A qualitative research design was chosen as the most suitable method to investigate the discourses at work in inclusion classrooms.

Research Questions

The central question explored in this investigation was as follows: What discourses do inclusion teachers draw upon to understand and make decisions about the students they teach?

Additional sub-questions included the following:

1. In what ways do teachers describe the students they teach and what characteristics inform these portraits?

2. In what ways does teacher education, experience, and identity influence teacher understandings?

3. How do teachers make sense of special education policy, practice and guidelines?
4. How do school policies, practices, and climate influence everyday practice and the particular needs of students?

5. What do teachers perceive as the implications of these classroom decisions on the educational futures of their students?

Theoretical Framework

The discourses that were so palpable in the discussions about Derek, a discourse of disability, a traditional special education discourse, a discourse of liberalism and a discourse of teacher professionalism, each, individually and collectively, affected Derek and his educational opportunities. These dominant mainstream discourses that develop in response to White, middle-class values fail to account for students like Derek. As a result, it is no surprise to see that students like Derek often fail to reach their full potential (Darder, 1991; Freire, 1970, Giroux, 1989, 1997; McLaren, 1994). In fact, it might be surprising if they did.

To increase opportunities for all students, and particularly those like Derek, it is necessary to dismantle the taken for granted discourses that currently inform educational practice. I suggest a more critical, democratic discourse that capitalizes on diversity, is color conscious, and values difference; a discourse that empowers, not stigmatizes, the disabled; a discourse that recognizes and addresses the structural and institutional inequities that produce limited opportunities for students of color and the disabled; and a discourse in which teachers, freed from excessive accountability demands and surveillance, take an active role in the educational process and become what Sachs (2003) described as “transformational professionals.”
A theoretical framework is critically important in any research endeavor because it colors our observations, structures our questions, and influences our interpretations (Merriam, 1998). The theoretical frameworks that informed this investigation were Disability Studies in Education and Critical Race Theory. These frameworks work together to critically examine the mainstream discourses of schooling. Disability Studies in Education (DSE), a subgroup of Disability Studies, grew in part from discontent with the field of special education and was framed by critical special educators. It is important to briefly examine the dissonance in special education that preceded the formation of Disability Studies in Education.

The Special Education Divide

The traditional principles that characterize the field of special education include the following:

- Disability is medically constructed and located within individuals.
- The purpose of special education is to accommodate and remediate the individual with a disability through specialized instruction and interventions.
- Special education prepares students to conform to societal expectations and restrictions.
- The field of special education, with roots in the disciplines of medicine, psychology and behaviorism, has and will continue to make significant contributions through traditional research and technically derived teacher interventions.

These traditional understandings maintain a positivist perspective that not all scholars espouse. As a result, some began to question the mainstream special education dogma, and in 2000, Andrews and other special educators, brought attention to this argument. Those convinced that
the field of special education was progressing and moving in the right direction were considered ‘incrementalists’. Those hoping to revolutionize the field of special education were considered ‘reconceptualists’. Reconceptualists advocated the following principles:

- Disability is not primarily medically constructed but is socially constructed.
- Although concerned with individual development, the primary purpose of special education is to conquer environmental limitations.
- Special education envisions a society without labels that respects individual differences.
- The field of special education must broaden its knowledge base and encourage teachers to engage in thoughtful, ethical decision making for the students they teach.

In 2002 the discussion continued, and Losen and Orfield observed that diversity, concerns over equity, and overrepresentation, had generated greater attention to sociocultural factors in special education. Reid and Valle (2004) were among those who credit the disability rights movement for encouraging a more sociopolitical and sociocultural analysis, particularly in the area of learning disabilities. They liken this awakening to “the insurrection of subjugated knowledges” that Foucault spoke about. Foucault (2003) defined subjugated knowledges in these ways:

> When I say “subjugated knowledges” I mean two things. On the one hand, I am referring to historical contents that have been buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systemizations. [In other words, I am referring to] blocks of historical knowledges that were present in the functional and systematic ensembles, but which were masked, and the critique was able to reveal their existence by using, obviously enough, the tools of scholarship. Second, when I say “subjugated knowledges” I am also referring to a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as . . . insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naive knowledge’s, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity. (p. 7)
In 2004, special educators Reid and Valle offered an alternative to the special education discourse and joined the Disability Studies in Education movement. They maintained that the traditional discourses currently operating within special education continue to legitimize medicalized assumptions. These medicalized assumptions perpetuate the ways in which treatment, surveillance, and control operate to manage difference (Foucault, 1995). Reid and Valle (2004) advocate for a more sociocultural perspective to counter the scientific and medical discourse found in traditional special education.

Other alternative perspectives have also emerged in response to the traditional special education discourse. Heydon (2005), a special educator grounded in critical theory, has encouraged a more ethical practice in special education that includes the following five goals:

1. The thoughtful consideration of a variety of theories and practices.
2. The dismantling of the general/special education duality while challenging traditional perspectives.
3. The recognition of historical context.
4. The adoption of an activist role by teachers within a liberatory framework.
5. The rejection of authoritarian discourses; ethical practice based on innovation not standardization in the form of “adhocracy.” (Skrtic, 1991, p. 181)

Skrtic, a vocal critic of traditional special education discourse, has also suggested a critical examination of traditional special education. Focusing specifically on the social construction of learning disabilities, Skrtic (2005) attempted to “disrupt this power relation, to deconstruct it and the social categories it creates by exposing inconsistencies, contradictions, and silences in special education’s functionalist knowledge tradition, and by disseminating alternative interpretations of special education and student disability” (p. 149). Skrtic goes on to encourage special educators to reconstruct their practices and discourses using interpretations that promote the values of democracy, community, participation, and inclusion. In this regard, my work focuses on the “disciplinary power” of special education which, operating under the taken-for-granted conventions of its knowledge tradition, has the effect of constituting students as
subjects for investigation, surveillance and treatment, a representation that has negative moral and political consequences because it involves various forms of medicalization, objectification, confinement, and exclusion. (p. 149)

More recently, in 2010, Baglieri, Valle, Connor, and Gallagher again revisited the special education debate. They noted that the arguments continue, the dichotomy endures, and inclusive education still remains a contentious issue. As a result, critical educators have joined the Disability Studies in Education (DSE) movement. A disability studies perspective has the promise to transform special education discourse from a preoccupation with a dilemma of difference (Minow, 1990) to an appreciation of difference as “natural, acceptable, and ordinary” (Baglieri & Knopf, 2004, p. 525). Baglieri and Knopf support a discourse of difference that is truly inclusive and gives all students access, value, and opportunity.

Disability Studies in Education

Without a money system, there is no debt.
Without a kinship system, no orphans.
Without a class system, no deprivation.
Without schools, no learning disabilities.
Without a working concept of truth, no liars.
Without eloquence, no inarticulateness. (McDermott & Varenne, 1995)

Two critical frameworks, Disability Studies in Education and Critical Race Theory, were chosen to explore the discourses surrounding teachers in inclusion settings. Critical theory has the potential to reveal the power relations within schools by examining historical, political, and institutional practices (Englert & Mariage, 2003). In addition, critical theory has the power to disrupt the conventional notions about order and rationality in schools that reproduce social difference along the axes of race, class, gender, and disability (Erevelles, 2000, 2005).

The interdisciplinary field known as Disability Studies (DS) seeks to disrupt the conventional notions of disability as deficit by defining disability in a fundamentally different
way. Disability Studies’ scholars regard disability as a social, historical, cultural, and political phenomenon (Barnes, Mercer, & Shakespeare, 1999; Davis, 1995; Linton, 1998; Mercer, 1973; Oliver, 1996), and challenge the idea of normalcy so prevalent within special education (Davis, 1997). In Disability Studies, the unit of analysis shifts from the individual to the social, political, and cultural context. The field of disability studies does not seek to cure, prevent, or treat disabilities. Instead, Disability Studies explores the ways in which individuals are marginalized based on difference (Linton, 1998).

Connor (2008) identified five qualities that characterize Disabilities Studies as a discipline and form the framework for this investigation:

- DS is located within a framework of social change that grew out of the civil rights movement.
- DS recognizes that disability is more than oppression and disabled persons experience the world in different, not deficient ways.
- DS is interdisciplinary, and includes such diverse disciplines as sociology, literature, critical theory, law, and philosophy. Research perspectives are varied and include social constructivist, interpretivist, materialist, post-modernist, and post-structuralist frameworks.
- DS challenges tradition and questions societal norms and conventions, including special education (Brantlinger, 2004).
- Disabled persons are at the heart of Disability Studies.

Disability Studies in Education (DSE), a subgroup of DS, adds another dimension to Disability Studies; DSE brings DS to school. Disability Studies has been criticized by some for being too far removed from the everyday obstacles that challenge disabled individuals. DSE,
has become a practical avenue for linking policy with practice in schools (Taylor, 2006). Although DSE has a more practical focus than DS, shared characteristics include a broad, interdisciplinary focus based within the liberal arts (Heshusius, 2003), and a post-positivist perspective (Danforth, 1999; Gallagher, 2003). According to Danforth and Gabel (2006), the purpose of DSE is the development of democratic, inclusive, accessible communities where biological and cultural diversities are not construed as deficits demanding remediation, illnesses requiring treatment. The new purpose is one of group identity empowerment for disabled persons as disability shifts in meaning from a social problem requiring tactics of individual modification and personal adjustment to oppressed group with a history, an identity, and a just cause. (p. 2)

Disability Studies in Education has filled a void not satisfied by traditional special education. Maintaining a DSE perspective, however, is not always comfortable or easy for a special education teacher. According to Heshusius and Ballard (1996),

> When we started to consciously reflect on how we had changed our most basic beliefs we had to acknowledge that we knew, before we could account for it intellectually, that we no longer believed in what we were doing or in what we were being taught. (p. 2).

This investigation provided inclusion teachers with the opportunity to participate in qualitative research and to examine personal understandings of disability that impact their instructional and disciplinary decisions.

Disability Studies in Education professionals oppose the traditional special education discourse and promote what Reid and Valle (2004, p. 472) term, “a reframing of the field.” This reframing shifts the focus away from the individual to the external cultural, societal, and political forces that disable. Disability Studies in Education seeks (1) to change our understandings of disability as deficit to disability as natural and ordinary human variation, and (2) to examine the role of disability in the arts, humanities, sciences, and education.
This investigation explored the ways in which discourses impact inclusion teachers. These discourses influence teacher decisions and impact student opportunity. A Disability Studies in Education vision requires educators to take action and scrutinize their practice, their understandings about disability, and their commitment to democracy, social justice, and equality. Critical Race Theory, like DSE, examines the power structures that operate to socially construct identity.

Critical Race Theory

Wellman (1977) defines racism as “culturally sanctioned beliefs which, regardless of the intentions involved, defend the advantages Whites have because of the subordinated positions of racial minorities” (p. xi). The foundations of Critical Race Theory (CRT) can be traced to African American thought in the post-civil rights era (Bell, 1980) that led to the development of Critical Legal Studies (Tate, 1997). Given that racism is so pervasive, CRT has become an interdisciplinary endeavor to examine the existing power structures within institutions. Numerous themes permeate CRT and include the importance of “voice,” the belief that knowledge is powerful, the scrutiny of civil rights law, the influence of the social sciences, and the critical examination of power and oppression in our society (Delgado, 1990). Most pertinent to this investigation are the defining elements and the educational implications identified by Tate (1997):
Table 1. Defining elements and educational implications most pertinent to this investigation (Tate, 1997).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defining Elements</th>
<th>Educational Implications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Racism is deeply engrained in the culture of the United States.</td>
<td>How does systemic racism limit opportunities for students of color?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRT is multidisciplinary in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding.</td>
<td>What theoretical frameworks can most completely describe the Black experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRT scrutinizes the civil rights law to reveal obvious inadequacies in implementation.</td>
<td>How can the limitations evident in educational theories be transformed to benefit students of color?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRT exposes the disingenuous claims of neutrality, objectivity, and color blindness made by powerful self interests.</td>
<td>How can CRT address these superficial claims?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRT analyzes law and society from a historical perspective that acknowledges the experiences of people of color (voice).</td>
<td>How does CRT challenge ahistorical perspectives and incorporate the experiential knowledge of race, sex and class?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Defining elements and educational implication most pertinent to this investigation (Tate, 1997).

CRT rejects the traditions of liberalism and color blindness that deny the influence of institutional power in dominant culture, including school settings. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an attempt to move discussions about race front and center (Tate, 1997).

Methodology

Qualitative research is holistic, empirical, interpretive, and empathic (Stake, 1995). Those rigorous, guiding principles directed this investigation. Qualitative research rests on the belief that “reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). Qualitative research also supports the notion of knowledge construction and includes the voices of teachers in research (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Olmeda, 2003). Throughout this
investigation, I listened to teachers and interpreted their assumptions and responses to discourse that directly or indirectly influenced their understandings about students and impacted their instructional and disciplinary decisions. Qualitative research that focuses on teacher understandings and actions can provide impetus for school improvement.

It is not sufficient to examine the decisions of teachers without investigating the discourses that influence these decisions. Research has consistently demonstrated that teacher beliefs do in fact appear to be the lens through which educational judgments are made (Alexander et al., 1987; Ehrenberg et al., 1995; Ferguson, 1998; Nespor, 1987; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Oates, 2003; Rist, 1970; Shavelson, 1983; Shavelson & Stern, 1981). Although teachers do respond to a multitude of factors when making decisions, Jackson (1986) and Lortie (1975) argued that teachers, instead of relying on professional education or reflection, rely primarily on personal experience, impulse, and intuition when making decisions. Teacher perceptions are linked directly to teacher expectations (Jones & Dindia, 2004). In fact, Jussim, Eccles, and Madon (1996) used the terms interchangeably to indicate their reliance on one another. It is imperative to explore the discourses that teachers draw upon in inclusion classrooms because teacher assumptions and perceptions ultimately influence expectations and impact student opportunity and achievement.

Case Study Design

Choosing a case study design for research is dependent on the researcher’s questions. According to Merriam (1998), a case study design is chosen in order to gain insight, to discover, or to interpret. Similarly, Stake (1995) noted that in case study research, “We try hard to understand how the actors, the people being studied, see things” (p. 12). My research questions
were exploratory in scope and can best be investigated through a case study design. Additionally, Merriam (1998) pointed out that a case study offers a way to investigate “complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon” (p. 41). Teachers’ response to discourse is without doubt a complicated phenomenon involving multiple variables. This study paid particular attention to the ways in which discourses operate to impact opportunity for disabled students and students of color.

Case studies are exhaustive investigations of a single unit of analysis, often referred to as a bounded system or bounded context (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Smith, 1978). Merriam (1998), defined a case study in terms of process. She described the case study as an “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon or social unit” (p. 34). The single unit of analysis or phenomenon in this investigation was the discourses that inclusion teachers draw upon to understand and make decisions about the students they teach. Shaw (1978) pointed out that case studies “concentrate attention on the way particular groups of people confront specific problems, taking a holistic view of the situation. They are problem centered, small scale, and entrepreneurial endeavors” (p. 2). Information gained from this particular effort may shed light on the ways in which teacher decisions contribute to the overrepresentation of students of color in special education. In this study, the case focused on the discourses surrounding the decisions that teams of inclusion teachers make in suburban middle and high schools.

To better understand the discourses surrounding teacher decision making, an instrumental case study design was employed. Instrumental case studies focus on a particular case in order to gain a better understanding of something else (Stake, 1995). By studying the discourses surrounding the understandings of inclusion teachers, I was hoping to better appreciate the factors that influence teacher understandings. A case study design is noteworthy because it relies
on multiple sources of data and results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon. Unfortunately, observations in this investigation were never accomplished due to bureaucratic constraints, so interviews alone provided the only source of data. In spite of this limitation, a case study that explores teachers’ response to dominant discourses can advance the knowledge base in this area, ultimately affecting and improving practice in schools.

Site Selection

The sites chosen were public middle and high schools in the suburbs of a large metropolitan southeastern city. At the outset of this investigation, I hoped to primarily focus on schools where students of color were in the minority. However, the realities of participant recruitment compelled me to include any and all schools willing to participate from my district. Three high schools (High Schools X, Y, and Z) and three middle schools (Middle Schools A, B, and C) participated in this investigation. Demographic information about each of the schools is recorded in the chart below.
Table 1

Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Students of color</th>
<th>Disabled students</th>
<th>Eligible for free/reduced lunch</th>
<th>AYP status 2009-2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School X</td>
<td>2,100</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Y</td>
<td>2,100</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>Not met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Z</td>
<td>1,800</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>Not met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School A</td>
<td>1,100</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School B</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School C</td>
<td>775</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>Met</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participant Selection

At the start of this investigation I hoped to interview teams of teachers and conduct classroom observations. After my research proposal was approved by The University of Alabama and administratively approved by my district, I received authorization to contact 28 principals at middle and high schools. After spending months trying to obtain permission and pin down the logistics for the classroom observation portion of my research design, without success, it became necessary to change my research design and conduct interviews only. At this point, I contacted principals a second time to gain permission and gather teacher recommendations. Teacher teams were chosen, not at random, but through purposeful sampling. My intent was to include teams that could provide valuable, specific information for this study. I hoped to interview veteran teams who were well-respected within their teaching communities. Teams were selected by the principals and department chairs at the participating schools. Department chairs and principals indicated that they chose quality teams that worked well together, and had positive records of student success. Based on principal recommendations, I contacted these
teachers to request their participation in one-on-one interviews. I was able to successfully secure consent from 12 teachers from six schools, two teachers from each high school and two teachers from each middle school.

The six high school teachers, all White females, were co-teachers in freshman math classes. Teachers at High School X had been teaching together for a number of years and seemed to work particularly well together. The content teacher, with 5 years of experience, had gone to school in the district. The special education teacher was older and was currently in a master’s program leading to special education certification; prior to teaching she had been a special education paraprofessional for several years. Teachers at High School Y were co-teachers together for the first time. The special education teacher had never teamed in a math class before, and felt somewhat uncomfortable with the material. Although she graduated with a special education degree, her previous experience was as a paraprofessional. The content teacher had significantly more classroom experience, and had recently moved to the southeast. Teachers at High School Z had been teammates for many years and had built a strong working relationship. They spoke openly about their working relationship, their classroom success, and how much they had learned from each other. The two teachers at Middle School A teamed together in 8th grade math. The math teacher was a White female and the co-teacher was a White male. They were both experienced, shared a great sense of humor, and genuinely enjoyed working together. The content teacher who began her teaching career 15 years ago as a kindergarten teacher, later becoming an at-risk teacher, seemed to fully appreciate special education students and teachers. The special education teacher had considerable experience as well. When students came into his room, respect and a good rapport were clearly evident. The special education teacher at Middle School B was a White male teaching science in a teamed setting. Unfortunately, I was ultimately
unable to interview the content teacher from Middle School B. After numerous requests and missed appointments, an interview with the science teacher from Middle School B was never accomplished. Both teachers at Middle School C were White females, teaming 8th grade math classes, and they appeared to have a particularly strong, equitable working relationship. The special education teacher had previously worked as a content teacher in an inclusion classroom. She moved into special education, in part, because she was so impressed by the alternative perspective and specialized instruction that the special education teacher brought to the classroom. The math teacher had worked for many years in a Title I school in another part of the state. Ultimately, 11 inclusion teachers at local high schools and middle schools in a county outside a southeastern urban center were interviewed during the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years.

These 11 teachers were cooperative and gave as much time as they could spare to this endeavor, and I sincerely appreciate their input. All of these teachers willingly agreed to participate in these interviews, even the middle school science teacher seemed amenable to meet with me but somehow our meeting just never materialized. I believe these teachers were willing to assist me because I am a teacher too and we share so much in common. I have worked for many years in high schools and middle schools and can empathize with their decisions and their concerns. These teachers seemed to appreciate the opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas with someone who understands what they go through each day.

Access

Prior to beginning the data collection, an IRB approval was obtained at The University of Alabama, as well as from the local district school system. After securing permission to conduct
the study at the university and county levels, I sought permission from local principals to work in specific school sites located within the district. I had originally planned to observe two teams of teachers in their classrooms as well as complete interviews, but access and availability were never realized. As a consequence, I removed the observation component and broadened my participants to include six teams of teachers.

Data Collection

Discourses surrounding teacher understandings were unveiled through teacher interviews. At the outset, I spent some time with the principals and department chairs within the schools, getting acquainted. I introduced them to my research objectives and laid out what I hoped to accomplish during my interviews. During these brief encounters, I gained some insight into the climate and philosophy of the school, particularly in regard to co-teaching and special education services. Multiple interviews were conducted during the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years and lasted between one to two hours per interview. Interviews were conducted separately to encourage individual teachers to be more open and forthcoming with information, and at dates and times convenient for the participants. During the 2009-1010 school year, two interviews were completed with both teachers from High School X, the Special Education teacher from High School Y, and the Special Education teacher from Middle School A. The remaining teachers (except for the general education teacher from Middle School B who was never interviewed) were interviewed formally only once. During the 2010-2011 school year, an additional interview was conducted with both teachers from High School X and the Special Education Teacher from Middle School B. During 2010-2011, participants responded to follow-up questions and member checks via email.
During the interviews, teachers were first asked general questions about their classrooms, the courses they teach, their teaching style, their challenges and frustrations, and their experience. Teachers were also asked to describe their students, typical activities, and their daily routine. Examples of interview questions included the following:

- **Tell me about the students in your classrooms . . .**
  - Those students that you consider successful . . .
  - Those students that present significant challenges . . .
  - How about boys versus girls?
  - How about Blacks versus Whites?
  - How about students with disabilities?

- **Tell me about your educational approach . . .**
  - How would you describe your role in the classroom?
  - How do you incorporate flexibility in your planning? Your assessments?
  - How do you promote cooperation? Competition?

- **Tell me your thoughts about special education and students with disabilities . . .**

In the beginning, questioning was general in nature and designed to create a portrait of individual teacher assumptions and understandings.

After establishing rapport and gathering preliminary information, questioning became more substantive and student specific, and more responsive to participant input and direction. Examples of questioning included the following:

- **Describe specific students and the ways in which their specific accommodations and placement impact their progress . . .**
Without special education support, what do you think would happen to these students?

What part does parent support play in the special education process?

When deciding to pass or fail a borderline student, what do you consider?

In what ways do political climate and school structure influence your decision making?

How do understandings of disability and deficit influence your assumptions and your decisions?

Throughout the interview process, researcher familiarity improved and participants provided in-depth information about their students and the assumptions that guided their practice.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis extracts meaning from the data by identifying and interpreting the patterns and relationships that emerge from the data; data analysis includes the collection, reduction, and cross-checking of data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Stake (1995) described this meaning making as the “aggregation of instances until something can be said about them as a class” (p. 74), while Merriam (1998) referred to these categories and patterns that emerge as themes. One distinguishing feature, among many, between qualitative and quantitative research is the timing of the data analysis. Quantitative data analysis is conducted at the conclusion of the data collection. In qualitative research, however, data analysis is an ongoing element that coincides simultaneously with data collection and continues long after the period of data collection has ended (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). These themes or classes emerge throughout
the data collection process, producing new, unanticipated channels of inquiry that could not have been predicted at the outset.

Although qualitative research is certainly descriptive by nature, data analysis is much more than mere description. As Strauss and Corbin (1998) pointed out, the researcher must be discerning and sensitive to the nuances in the data, while at the same time analyzing the content of the data to develop meaningful categories. The data analysis in this investigation followed the recommendations outlined by Merriam (1998). I was careful to conduct this investigation in an ethical manner. I attempted to be clear, concise, and descriptive regarding methodology, and logical and thorough when accomplishing data analysis and documentation.

Participant interviews were audiotaped. Following each interview, I transcribed the audiotapes word for word. In addition, each participant interview was assigned an identifier linked to their particular school and area of responsibility, for example, *Special Education Teacher from High School X.* After transcribing the first transcript, I examined the transcript with my research questions in front of me and highlighted data that appeared to logically relate to my questions. I then analyzed the highlighted portions of text, and listed the data pieces that could be grouped together alongside each transcript. I completed the same procedure with each subsequent transcript. In addition, the data pieces that were listed alongside each transcript were compared and consolidated, one transcript with the next, until all transcripts were completed. The result was a list of data pieces that represented the totality of data, and broad, preliminary categories. I chose not to identify category names at this point, but instead linked the preliminary categories with my research questions, as represented in the flowchart below.
Figure 2. Linking of preliminary categories with research questions.
I examined the data again, both within and among categories, using the constant comparative method to more accurately reflect the essence of the data. At this point, satisfied with the fit between the data and the preliminary categories, I set out to specify category names. These categories and category names emerged in response to my research questions and were developed in accordance with the guidelines set forth by Merriam (1998):

- These categories represent possible answers to my research questions about the discourses that teachers draw upon to understand the students they teach.
- These categories include and account for all relevant data related to my research questions.
- These categories have been refined and are mutually exclusive.
- These category names are responsive to the data and accurately reflect the essence of the data.
- These categories reflect similar levels of abstraction and fit well together. (pp. 183-184)

With category names in front of me, the data were again scrutinized, and refinements were made within and among the categories. Some subcategories were too broad and so were broken down to more adequately reflect the data. Other bits of data were combined together to present a more coherent and more authentic perspective. The final category names and subcategories that best characterized the themes in the data are represented in the diagram below.
My primary research purpose was to gain insight and make meaning of the discourses that teachers draw upon to understand the students they teach. The main themes that emerged are presented in detail in Chapter 4.

**Researcher Positionality**

As a White, middle-aged teacher in a suburban high school, I do not presume to speak for students of color, disabled students, or teachers of color. My hope at the outset of this investigation was that teachers who work with students of color and students with disabilities might come to view their work in different and more meaningful ways, with greater awareness.
about the ways in which their decisions and understandings may marginalize and disenfranchise the students they teach. My concern for students of color and students with disabilities cannot and should not be underestimated, and certainly the possibility does exist that my perspectives influenced the study design and the participants in this study. Despite that, Pugach (2001) admonished White educators not to sit back and allow Blacks alone to tackle the disproportionality issue. Although this may be a fine line for a White educator to walk alone, it is my contention that all teachers, regardless of color, must work together to make schooling more democratic and equitable for all students. Similarly, Andersen and Collins (2004) pointed out that “Resistance to oppression on behalf of one’s own group is not enough. Achieving social justice can only take place when people and groups build coalitions with others” (p. 11).

I am certainly mindful of the inherently political nature of this study. Questioning taken for granted notions of disability alongside such sensitive issues as race, gender, culture, and class can be threatening to some and uncomfortable to many. As MacDonald and Walker (1977) noted,

Educational case studies are usually financed by people who have, directly or indirectly, power over those studied and portrayed. At all levels of the system what people think they’re doing, what they say they are doing, what they appear to others to be doing, and what in fact they are doing, may be sources of considerable discrepancy. . . . Any research which threatens to reveal these discrepancies threatens to create dissonance, both personal and political. (p. 187)

I attempted to be sensitive, considerate and reflexive throughout this investigation. As a White educator conducting a case study involving issues of disability, race, gender, culture, and class, I understood my precarious position and made every effort to minimize the impact of my own convictions during this research exploration. My precarious position, however, should not and did not preclude me from negotiating this untested terrain.
Establishing Trustworthiness

Assessing validity and reliability in qualitative research is accomplished a bit differently and becomes somewhat more problematic than in quantitative research. This is primarily because of the philosophical, post-positivist underpinnings that distinguish qualitative research. From this perspective, knowledge construction and reality are considered fluid, dynamic, and socially constructed, and research is best conducted and understood holistically, within a social context. The researcher, or data collection instrument, provides rich and thick description, inviting the reader to become part of the research and make sense of the data. To address the issue of reliability and validity in qualitative research, Guba and Lincoln (1981) suggested an evaluation based on the trustworthiness of the research, in preference to traditional quantitative notions. This alternative is by no means the only way to address validity and reliability in qualitative research, but I consider the paradigm useful and straightforward. This investigation utilized the Guba and Lincoln alternative, and evaluated the trustworthiness of the data by assessing the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research design.

Credibility

If the results of an investigation are consistent with participants’ perspectives, the investigation is considered credible. Attempts to ensure credibility included close proximity to participants, and was achieved through face-to-face interviews. Merriam (1998) maintained that qualitative research allows us to get closer to participants, which results in more complex and holistic representations of data and situations. Consistency was additionally addressed through multiple interviews over a period of time and by asking a variety of questions. In order to assess the accuracy of my interpretations, I also took advantage of member checks. Participants were
given opportunities to provide additional input, and to assess the accuracy of my interpretations and conclusions. Several participants responded to clarify or to expand on their previous responses and the transcripts were amended to more accurately reflect their intentions. I also sought assistance, advice, and criticism from colleagues familiar with my research. These colleagues examined my data and interpretations to make sure that logical connections and interpretations were evident. I was frank and straightforward regarding my biases, and reflexive about the ways in which my personal attitudes, beliefs, and understandings influenced the conduct of my study.

Although considerable attempts were made to ensure consistency, limited access that was beyond my control may have unfortunately reduced credibility. Because classroom observations were never realized, the only source of information was teacher interviews. Although triangulation was attempted, triangulation was never accomplished.

Transferability

If the documentation of methodology and data collection is thorough, descriptive, and logical enough to allow readers to make use of the data on their own terms, transferability has been achieved. Transferability can only be achieved if the description of the data is thorough, precise, and detailed enough to be useful for the reader. Purposeful sampling increases the likelihood that readers interested and involved in school settings will take and use this information in their own contexts. The methodology employed throughout this investigation was detailed, clear, and precise. Findings may speak to educators who can identify with and appreciate the voices of classroom teachers.
Dependability

If evidence of changes or unexpected incidents is documented accurately and sufficiently, dependability has been established. Dependability shows that the findings are consistent. This is determined by examining all the process and product documentation, including the researcher’s daily journal to determine whether the findings are supported by the data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to this examination as an “inquiry audit.” I was careful to document carefully and accurately, and I used colleagues and my dissertation committee to monitor documentation.

Confirmability

If the outcomes of the inquiry appear to be a result of participants’ experiences and perceptions, not researcher partiality, then confirmability can be assured. Confirmability suggests that the results of the research follow directly from the data; the researcher’s biases do not get in the way. To ensure this consistency and dependability, three things must be considered: investigator positionality, triangulation, and an audit trail. I was clear and forthcoming about my biases and my intentions, and I carefully documented the processes I used to report findings and develop themes. Because I was never granted access for classroom observations, triangulation suffered. The issues of confirmability and dependability are similar and can both be assured through an audit trail.

Limitations of the Study

The nuts and bolts of “doing” qualitative, school-based research presented significant challenges in this investigation. I met with significant obstacles that were particularly frustrating during the early phases of this investigation. Although the classroom observation phase of my
research had been approved, getting schools to allow me to actually come into teachers’
classrooms with students present became nearly impossible and I finally had to give up. I do
appreciate their concerns and hesitancy but I had hoped to be able to convince them that their
fears were unfounded; I obviously could not. As a result, I settled on interviews alone and
expected to find little resistance. Plenty of teachers agreed to participate at the outset, but “the
devil is in the details.” I experienced repeated emails that were never returned and appointments
for interviews that were missed and forgotten. Teachers are very busy people and I understand
that, but my frustration level continued to climb. Thankfully, I did get to interview 11 wonderful
teachers (with the help of four outstanding principals) who did grant me access to their
professional lives. At the start, I knew that some of these teachers may have agreed to meet with
me just because their principals asked them to, and I understood that and I am grateful to their
principals. However, as we talked throughout the school year, deeper relationships developed
and our conversations become much more meaningful and thoughtful.

During this investigation there was an insufficient number of interviews with participants,
participants seemed reluctant to speak on sensitive topics, there were no classroom observations,
and participants were not particularly diverse. As a result, triangulation of the data was never
achieved. The current political and economic climate that surrounds schooling may, in part,
account for the limitations that were experienced during this investigation. The scrutiny imposed
by “No Child Left Behind” legislation puts considerable pressure on schools. In a qualitative
study located within a California high school undertaking reform, Olsen and Sexton (2009) set
out to explore the ways in which federal and state policy contexts influenced schools and
teachers’ work. During the analytic phases of their research, Olsen and Sexton reported the
following:
We found that from the school administration and teaching staff came rigid
defensiveness, coupled with a psychological myopia, that sabotaged the reform attempts
and created a hostile work environment for the teachers whom we studied. To better
understand this phenomenon, we turned to sociological research regarding how
organizations cope with adversity. Specifically, we took up the concept of threat rigidity.
(p. 12)

Threat rigidity refers to the ways in which an organization responds when under attack. Olsen
and Sexton suggested that the dysfunctional patterns they observed impeding reform efforts at
this California high school could be explained by threat rigidity. When an organization
experiences external pressures, “structures tighten; centralized control increases; conformity is
stressed; accountability and efficiency measures are emphasized; and alternative or innovative
thinking is discouraged” (p. 15). I am not suggesting that teachers or principals felt threatened by
my research requests for teacher interviews and classroom observations. I am suggesting,
however, that in times of increased scrutiny, when Adequate Yearly Progress has never been
more important, teachers and principals may be less willing to allow access if they do not have
to. In addition, the current economic climate may have impacted teacher willingness to be
interviewed and to speak freely. Less public funding for education and more accountability mean
less job security for school personnel. Worried about how to make ends meet, teachers may not
be willing to participate in school-based research. Fearful of losing their jobs, teachers may be
less likely to speak openly about sensitive topics. I suggest that external and political pressures
restricted my school-based research efforts, limiting the possibilities for a more complete
understanding about teachers and discourse.

The advantage of qualitative research is that it provides a rich account of a phenomenon,
paying particular attention to the participants’ perspectives. This advantage, however, can also be
a limitation depending upon your point of view. If you are searching for the solution to the
problem of disproportionality in a tightly controlled, experimental design intended to determine
significant statistical cause and effect between variables such as IQ, teacher gender, or student exposure to early intervention, then this study may not interest you. You may well view this qualitative inquiry as too small, too culturally embedded, and too long-winded to be of any value at all.

Although a single case study must be cautious not to minimize or over exaggerate the incident under consideration (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), a single case study can provide an opportunity to explore issues and investigate phenomena that are relatively unexplored or misunderstood. Solutions to the disproportionality issue are too complex and comprehensive to ever be solved by quantitative means alone. Qualitative research can provide a rich, vibrant portrait of the discourses surrounding teacher decision making that may ultimately lead to decisions that empower students with disabilities and students of color.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This chapter presents the findings from teacher interviews about the ways in which teachers respond to discourse in inclusion settings. These findings are based on interviews with six teams of 11 inclusion teachers at middle and high schools in the suburbs of a metropolitan southeastern city. The levels of teacher experience ranged from 3 to 15 years. To ensure anonymity, the names of the school district, schools, teachers, and students have not been reported.

The findings are organized around the study’s central research question:

- What discourses do inclusion teachers draw upon to understand the students they teach?

Teacher responses and conversations were analyzed according to the methodology outlined in Chapter 3. This included identifying data in the transcripts that appeared relevant to the research questions, and then finding patterns in the data. Based on these patterns, categories and category names were identified. Throughout this process the constant comparative method was used to more clearly refine and make meaning of the data. The broad themes that emerged in response to my research questions centered around Special Education, Student Capital, and Teacher Professionalism. Teacher responses that led to the development of these broad themes are explored in detail below.
Figure 4. Teacher understandings about special education.

Theme 1: Disability as Deficit

Teachers respond to disabled students from a medical perspective.

Without a doubt, the deficit discourse influenced the understandings of inclusion teachers. The deficit understandings of teachers are organized around the elements that characterize deficit thought (Valencia, 1997).

Blaming the victim. A medical construction of disability focuses attention on individual deficit, and it was clear from teacher responses that a medical perspective guided teachers’ understandings and impacted their decisions. Not surprisingly, all high school and middle school
math teachers reported that the majority of special education students in their math classes had inadequate math skills. Yet, in spite of limited time, alternatives, and resources, these teachers persevered. The Math Teacher from High School Y, the more diverse of the two high schools that did not make AYP, reported that some special education students are so far below grade level that it is almost impossible to meet their needs, particularly in a class of 36. The Special Education Teacher from Middle School B expressed similar frustrations:

> It’s tough to meet them at their socioeconomic characteristics or preferences and their ability level with a curriculum that, for many cases, they are just not equipped to handle at this point.

The Special Education Teacher from High School X agreed that special education students “are truly at a disadvantage” academically, and spoke about the relationship between individual deficit and eligibility category. She suggested that students labeled emotionally/behavior disordered (EBD) or other health impaired (OHI) were more successful than learning disabled students. When describing the special education students in their classrooms, these teachers focused on individual deficit.

> Always supportive, teachers suggested ways in which students might capitalize on individual deficit as a prescription for success. The Special Education Teacher from Middle School C suggested that special education students can serve as exemplars and model problem solving skills and life strategies:

> It is not always going to be that easy forever. I see that a lot of times . . . it [the struggles and strategies of special education students] always lets some of your average learners know that it is okay to ask a question, it’s okay not to be good at everything; I’m not the only one in the room that doesn’t get it; I can feel comfortable. There’s gonna be somebody else who doesn’t get it too.

Although disabled students continue to be situated at the bottom of the classroom hierarchy, this example illustrates the way in which special education students are used to reveal educational
possibility. Teachers capitalize on the challenges and strategies of special education students to benefit all learners, including special education students themselves. The Math Teacher from Middle School C also suggested that students can, in fact, capitalize on weakness:

If you have a weakness in reading you need to know it; you need to know that you are going to have a little bit harder time. I read a lot slower than other kids so I didn’t like to read because of that, but maybe had I known that’s why, it would have changed things. I don’t think I have a learning disability, but it’s just the whole idea of okay this is a struggle for me; I have to work harder.

Speaking from her own experiences as a poor reader, this teacher emphasized the need to be aware of and accept our personal limitations. Yet, the challenges posed by competing discourses led the Math Teacher from Middle School C to explicitly make the distinction between her particular weakness and the label of learning disability. Although this teacher felt compelled to distance herself from the disability label, the Special Education Teacher from High School X suggested that labels have little impact on the successful special education students she encounters at her high school:

I don’t think they pay attention; at this level they don’t pay attention. Even in the Advanced Studies program, students that are OHI, it doesn’t bother them. I think the regular ed students don’t even think about it. It does bother some sped students; it bothers the ones that are the least successful because they know they’re the least successful.”

Successful special education students that have greater cultural capital may also have greater immunity against the negative effects of labeling. However, special education students of color, or those disenfranchised by poverty, may not be so lucky.

Because deficit thinking guided teacher understandings, teachers expressed confidence in their abilities to identify disabled students. According to the Math Teacher from Middle School A, it seemed unnecessary to refer a student for eligibility testing. She commented that “I can pick out a kid with a deficit. There’s no need to go through the runaround; I can meet the kid’s needs without an IEP.” The Special Education Teacher from Middle School A agreed:
I could take you in a room for five minutes and I bet you would say: “That’s one of yours, that’s one of yours.” That’s what I want to say in some of these eligibility meetings; we don’t need testing, we can just tell.

In fact, the Special Education Teacher from High School Z commented that the active kids in her classes that are not being successful are actually “ADHD kids that haven’t been diagnosed yet.” Teachers seemed able to identify because they were identifying disability as deficit.

Some teachers were not so confident in their abilities to identify disabled students. The Math Teacher from High School X commented:

If I walked into a classroom and they told me that I have eight special ed kids on my roster, I definitely could not tell who they are. Some of them I could say “Oh yes, I understand their disability, but some I cannot.” Some of my top notch students are on my special ed roster. I have documentation on that one; they are all ‘A’ students.

Based on teacher responses, special education services seemed to justify, without question, the arbitrarily assigned disability labels. The Math Teacher from High School X asserted that “Some special education students are so successful you wouldn’t even think they have a disability because they are so smart.” The Special Education Teacher from Middle School A also indicated that “There are some sped kids that you don’t know why they are even in special ed.” The professional context in which teachers operate poses significant challenges for classroom teachers. As a result, teachers fail to question the legitimacy of disability labels, or the ways in which teaching strategies fail to respond effectively to these labels. In addition, the efficacy of special education services remains unexamined.

Blaming the victim’s family. A discourse of deficit focuses not only on the student but on the student’s family and support system. Results from teacher interview indicated that special education teachers, particularly, believe that disabled students, particularly those with cognitive deficits, require considerable parental support to be successful. The Special Education Teacher from High School Y
praised the parent of one of her “successful” special education students. This parent, a public school 
teacher, had proactively sent a note to all of her child’s teachers explaining her child’s disability at the 
beginning of the semester. Although this teacher appreciated the challenges faced by the predominantly 
poor and minority families in her school, this note signified uncharacteristic and extraordinary parent 
involve'ment. This communication spoke volumes to the teacher. This same teacher, when describing a 
particularly unsuccessful student, noted that the parent had in fact emailed about getting some extra help 
for her son. The teacher, although mindful of the parent’s interest, made the following remark:

    His parents are pretty supportive. They have emailed a couple of times trying to 
get him extra help. Maybe they should have done that earlier so he would not 
have gotten so far behind.

The teacher’s comments seemed to indicate that although some level of parental support was 
indeed evident, it just was not quite good enough. The Special Education Teacher from High 
School Z expressed her frustration with special education parents:

    One of my biggest challenges is dealing with sped parents in general. They are not ready 
to hold their child accountable. They still want us to hold them accountable, while their 
parents are continuing to hold their hands. That is one of my biggest challenges because I 
am not that way. They’re in ninth grade and they need to start doing it and it seems like 
it’s getting worse and not better. Parents, for some reason, are enabling their children.”

Although involvement was evident, some teachers were not convinced that parents of disabled 
students always acted in “supportive” ways. It was clear from teacher responses that a discourse 
of deficit informed these portraits of parents and students.

    One teacher in particular expressed surprise at the level of support they received from 
parents of disabled students. The Special Education Teacher from Middle School A commented:

    Typically you don’t get that [positive parent support] from special ed parents. We’ve got 
some parents here and they could care less; you don’t see them and They don’t return 
phone calls and they don’t return emails, and that’s typical of what I’ve always had. This 
building has been a little bit different. I put grades in on Pinnacle and that night I’m 
getting emails, emails from small group kids’ parents--the difference is money and 
education.
Deficit conceptions of disability color the understandings of teachers and impact their decisions. What results, although unintended, may be negative consequences for students of color and limited opportunities for success.

*Educability.* Significantly, all teachers, both general education and special education, were united in their curriculum recommendations for the students they teach, and advocated a return to basic skills and a more remedial curriculum for special education students. The general education high school teachers in this investigation were all math teachers, and a new math curriculum had recently been adopted by the State Department of Education. The standards-based curriculum was developed to balance demanding concepts and computational skills with realistic problem-solving opportunities to prepare students for college coursework and professional careers. Different from previous math curriculums, the new curriculum was more integrated and more rigorous; comments made by stakeholders in the district support this assertion. The core high school math courses combine algebra, geometry, and statistics. Instruction is focused on student-centered involvement through problem-solving activities. At the outset, a support course was offered for freshman and sophomore math courses to address the anticipated needs of struggling students. After implementation, a support course for Math 3 was added as well. The state continues to make adjustments regarding mathematics requirements for graduation for general education and special education students. Currently (2011), the curriculum is under revision again.

All teachers interviewed spoke about the new math and the difficulties they were experiencing in the classroom. High school teachers, both general education and special education, suggested that students are not being successful because the curriculum “jumps all
over the place.” Students, they maintain, do not get enough drill and practice. Math and special education teachers, again and again, spoke about the need to return to the old curriculum, particularly for special education students. The Math Teacher from High School X remarked that “You can’t expect kids who never pass to want to explore and discover this math curriculum. How do you get any kid to do that?”

All high school and middle school teachers suggested that a more remedial math course option should be available for lower level and special education students. Several teachers recommended that more practical, budgeting type courses should be available for these students because, as the Math Teacher from Middle School C put it, “This would be better than a minimal competency at a higher level of mathematics.” Teachers were adamant in their belief that all students, particularly special education students, do not need this level or type of math to be successful in the future. The Math Teacher from Middle School C further commented:

I understand the importance of the core curriculum and advanced math, but we are not all going to need to know how to do calculus. I am a math teacher and I don’t need to know how to do it. I’m not saying they shouldn’t be exposed to it, but there are other aspects of their life, such as real world math, that are more important.

The Special Education Teacher from Middle School A was also convinced that most special education students do not need advanced math:

High school kids? . . . A lot are military bound, a lot have dropped out, or some are just chugging along. Some are going to do what Daddy does: work on cars, etc., and we tell parents they have to know Math 1 and 2 and they [parents] are like, “Come on. . . .”

All teachers at both levels spoke about the need to broaden graduation options and include more than college oriented coursework. As the Special Education Teacher from High School X put it, “It bothers me that our kids come to school, work hard, but cannot earn a clear diploma because we offer them classes they don’t want or need and very little choice.” High school teachers were convinced that students drop out of school because they know they stand no
chance of passing all the graduation tests to get a diploma. All teachers maintained that the current “one diploma fits all” approach does no such thing, and were strongly supportive of a vocational/career option. The Special Education from Middle School B suggested the following:

This country runs on the jobs of service professionals. We need a track for these kids. We could keep kids in school if we had something more appealing for them, something that is not quite so rigorous for them. We are doing kids a disservice.

The Special Education Teacher from Middle School C echoed these same sentiments when she said,

We will need auto mechanics; we need to respect those careers. We are not all college bound at the same time. You won’t finish your doctorate in the same amount of time I finished mine. We don’t all get married at the same age. We need to value and respect individual differences.

Both teachers from High School Z suggested that lower level classes were necessary because “they [special education students] are never going to pass if we don’t offer those classes.” All teachers were consistent in their recommendations for a more skills-based curriculum for special education students.

Curriculum recommendations for special education students included basic, remedial, and vocational skills. Teacher descriptions of current inclusion classrooms were consistent with curriculum recommendations; instruction was reductionist and interventions responded to medical conceptions of disability. Inclusion classrooms, structured to meet the needs of special education and lower level students, were described by the teachers interviewed and included the following characteristics:

- Reductionist Curriculum
  - Direct lecture is best for these kids and then they should practice. (Math Teacher from High School X)
  - I doctor tests because they are just too hard for our kids. (Special Education Teacher from Middle School A)
• The quizzes and tests are too hard, especially for the special ed kids. They are too abstract for them sometimes. The questions are . . . it’s not straightforward. You have to read the word problem and then try to take from it what you can, and I say use your brain but these kids don’t think like that. (Math Teacher from High School X)

• We do tiered lessons, differentiation, we tone down the curriculum . . . a lot of kinesthetic. . .can’t go back as low as some of them really need though. (Special Education Teacher from High School Z)

• Teacher provided notes

• Instead of copying notes, which for some of our special needs kids takes them forever, we provide a note program on the blog. (Math Teacher from Middle School A)

• Teacher initiated assistance

• I walk around; if I don’t, they won’t come up to me and ask questions. (Math Teacher from High School X)

• Teacher Control

• We give them a folder so they don’t have to get up as much and start causing trouble. (Special Education Teacher from High School Y)

• You never tell speds [special education students] that something doesn’t count because they just won’t do it. (Special Education Teacher from Middle School A)

In addition to meeting academic needs, teachers also maintained that they provide support and advocacy for the students they teach. A medical construction of disability characterizes a special education student as a passive recipient of curative or palliative services, and when students are not meeting with success teachers are eager to step in. The Math Teacher from High School X remarked that special education students are “watched” more. When “watching” results in more positive attention, the teacher suggested, students win. When “watching” results in more negative attention, obviously students lose.
Theme 2: Leveling the Playing Field

*Teachers believe that special education can and should compensate for individual deficit.*

All special education teachers spoke about the significance of leveling the playing field for special education students with high incidence disabilities. The Special Education Teacher from Middle School B put it well, and echoed the sentiments of all the special education teachers interviewed: “I firmly believe that leveling the playing field to the maximum extent possible is our mission and that we can succeed with many kids in many ways.” This leveling of the playing field occurs primarily through accommodations such as extended time or copies of notes that give disabled students, according to the Special Education Teacher from High School Y, “a little bit of a leg up.”

*Teachers go above and beyond.* When it comes to accommodations, all teachers consistently reported that they do whatever it takes to meet the needs of special education students, regardless of what the IEP requires. These teachers viewed IEP mandated accommodations as minimum requirements. In fact, the Special Education Teacher from High School X remarked that,

> Accommodations are necessary only to force those teachers [teachers that don’t accommodate] to do it. Most teachers do it anyway [provide accommodations], legally required or not.

The Special Education Teacher from Middle School A concurred; “good teachers do what’s best for kids regardless of what the IEP says.” All teachers, both general education and special education, indicated that they consistently adhere to the accommodations mandated in the IEP
and, all but the least experienced Special Education Teacher from High School Y, indicated that they provide additional accommodations if they believe these will be helpful.

Results also indicated that accommodations are not reserved for special education students alone. Teachers offer assistance and accommodations to any students they believe might benefit. Both middle and high school general education teachers spoke about “trying” accommodations with less successful general education students in their classes. The Math Teacher from High School X summed up the attitudes of the other teachers regarding accommodations:

We found that those tests are just a little too long, so if they don’t finish we always give them time the next day . . . special ed, regular ed, I don’t care who they are. If they want extra time, take it. We finally realized that we need to be cutting this [the length of the tests], so I look at it and adjust, and I do this for everybody . . . I know they say you need to differentiate for testing but if you are going to do it for one you should do it for all; that’s how I feel--anything we can do to help. ‘Can I have 30 more minutes to finish my test?’ Of course I’ll push my curriculum back a day if it means they will pass!

The Special Education Teacher from Middle School C expressed similar sentiments:

Sometimes gen ed kids question why some kids are getting accommodations, and sometimes they ask for it. Most everything that I do along that line is for anyone in the class that struggles. The kids know each other; our groupings change all the time, who I walk in and hand things to changes all the time. We are flexible with accommodations. For anybody? Absolutely. When we first start solving equations I type up this little thing [holds up a sticky note] which is just the steps. I keep them in my pocket and I walk around to those kids that I know need one, and then some of the kids say ‘Can I have one?’ and I say ‘Yes, but you can’t use it on the test.’ But, I might allow some of my kids to use it on the test; it’s not a secret.

The fact that the majority of these teachers provide equal opportunities to all students, regardless of labels, might appear, at face value, to be an unfair advantage to general education students. General education students are at an advantage, but not because they are afforded accommodations. General education students benefit because they receive instructional accommodations without the stigma of a deficit label.
Teachers expressed concerns about accommodations. Although the value of accommodations was a well-developed theme throughout teacher interviews, teachers did express concerns about the use and application of accommodations. The Special Education Teacher from Middle School C warned about the fine line between accommodations and special advantages.

I do see the flip side. I do see that sometimes if you are not careful about what you put in an IEP you are giving an advantage. I can’t say, ‘Well, you only have to do 1, 3 and 7’ because I know those are the easy ones. That’s giving an advantage. We’ve got to all be on the same standard here. I have seen that happen sometimes and it all depends on the teachers. I have seen teachers with multiple choice [tests] who will eliminate one choice. Well, you are giving an advantage because you are changing the odds. All kids are going to guess on some of them. But, a different format of a test, I would be more supportive of that because they are still expected to know the material. I think that’s one of the biggest challenges that I’ve had. . . . I had a hard time with that when I came here because I wanted to help so much . . . finding that balance is tough.

This particular teacher struggled between wanting to help her students and striving to be fair.

Although teachers acknowledged the value of accommodations, they remarked over and over again that special education and accommodations have served to enable and coddle students. The Math Teacher from Middle School A was concerned about the negative aspects of accommodations:

It’s [special education and accommodations] become a crutch for some, and I understand that there are children who are ADD (attention deficit disorder) and ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder). You can test most kids and a lot of them come out with a touch, but I think for some of them it’s become enabling. Accommodations need to be reasonable. I don’t think a lot of them are and I don’t think a lot of them make sense.

The Math Teacher from High School Z remarked that “it’s not going to be like that in the real world; kids need to be held to the same standards.” Although teachers believe in the power of accommodations to level the playing field and assist all students that struggle in school, teachers suggested that accommodations need to be chosen carefully and weaned over time.
Teachers suggested that special education services compensate for individual deficit, or level the playing field, in two additional ways:

- Special education keeps students in school.

Several teachers suggested that special education keeps students from dropping out of school. Both teachers from High School X suggested that if it were not for special education, many of the students they teach would have dropped out of school years earlier. The Special Education Teacher commented that “. . . special education teachers provide the encouragement and support necessary to keep students from dropping out.” The Special Education Teacher from Middle School A remarked that special education students do not know how to handle failure and would have shut down long ago without special education support.

- Special education provides additional services that may include another teacher in the classroom.

Teachers consistently indicated that having two teachers in the classroom was one of the best parts of special education. “I do see some benefits to special education, and the additional teacher is definitely the biggest benefit,” according to the Math Teacher from Middle School C. The Math Teacher from High School Y also commented:

I think inclusion is awesome for these special ed kids. If they have disabilities, for me to be the only person in the classroom is just so hard. To have my co-teacher, it’s just like relief to know that if someone has their hand raised across the room, she can go and help. She helps all the kids in class. Yes, she’s geared toward her kids with disabilities but she knows that there are other kids that just haven’t been quite diagnosed with their disabilities, and she’s quite willing to help. Special ed is a good thing. Again, it’s nice to have two teachers in the classroom.

Teachers recognize the benefits of an additional teacher, and the Math Teacher from High School Y indicated that students concur. She spoke about a student with an accommodation that required testing in a separate setting:
This student actually does better in the classroom because one of us is always available there. He can ask us questions or clarify something if necessary. So, that was just amended on his IEP. He has extreme test anxiety, so he just does knowing that a teacher is there for him.

Teachers recognize the value of an additional teacher in the classroom. All students in an inclusion setting benefit from extra attention and individualized instruction, not just the disabled students. Once again, general education students reap the rewards of inclusion without the stigma of a disability label.

*Theme 3: System Constraints*

*Teachers suggest that special education decisions are often made in response to district realities instead of student needs.*

All teachers at both levels expressed frustration with the realities that limit their decision-making alternatives. Frustrations were evident in the following areas:

- Lack of available placement options

One articulated goal of this district is to move the majority of disabled students into inclusion settings. Consequently, the number of small group classes countywide is decreasing. As a result, the subject of placement and placement alternatives came up often during interviews and appeared to be a hot button topic for many of the teachers. The Special Education Teacher from High School X remarked that, “We are taking inclusion to the extreme and as a result we are not looking at individual students and their specific needs.” Many schools in the district, particularly at the high school level, do not offer small group classes at all because their particular school does not have any highly qualified special education teachers certified in areas like math and English to teach these small group classes. In response to the lack of placement
alternatives, the Special Education Teacher from High School Z suggested a remedy to address the lack of highly qualified math teachers:

Our most challenging students are the special ed students coming in without math skills. We’ve got kids that belong in small group classes but we don’t have them. No, we don’t have any highly qualified Math Teachers. If you have some, then I wish they would spread those teachers around the county. If there’s three highly qualified math teachers at High School ‘G’, then spread them around. You can tell a lot of students really, really could benefit from it because they don’t have those basic skills. With a class of 32, even with three adults in the room, it is nearly impossible to get to everybody. They really, really need help one on one.

All teachers, both general education and special education, were supportive of the inclusion model for most students. However, teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the limited options for students that function “way below” grade level academically. Some schools, however, still have small group classes, particularly for students with mild, moderate, or severe intellectual disabilities. The Math Teacher from High School X reported that an inclusion student was moved into an intellectually disabled small group classroom because that was the only option, their last resort. This particular teacher remarked:

These two particular students who we did this for were never going to be successful in a regular classroom. Never, never, ever, ever and now that we see them in [the small group setting] they seem so much happier; they have fulfillment. We have a bakery here and that’s what these kids do, they get to do things they know how to do. They weren’t getting that feedback in our classes; I know they have to be happier kids today.

The Math Teacher at Middle School A was particularly frustrated with the county initiative:

I think the goal of reducing the small group classes and the long term goal of not having small group is absolutely absurd. Some of the kids cannot function in co-taught. I also teach Math Connections, a 9-week course for the very severely at risk, [for the] not passing CRCT kids. I do that during one of the connections classes and I get paid not much. What I find in there, and because we have a lot of small group students, is that there’s no basic skill fundamentals at all. To put those kids in inclusion classrooms and expect them to do ‘systems of equations,’ you have to change your entire pace and you have to change the depth, and to think that the regular ed classroom is the least restrictive environment for some of these kids is just not realistic.
The Special Education Teacher from High School X also felt that there is a place for both placement options:

I definitely like seeing the students included in the general population but I also think there is a place for small group. In inclusion classes you have students all over the place ability wise, and it is a struggle to meet all their needs because the range is so wide and many of them do get left in the dust. I really think small group has its place; you can provide a lot more individualized instruction and help those kids along.

Not only were teachers frustrated with limited placement alternatives, but teachers were also frustrated with the scheduling constraints that limit options for special education and general education students. According to the special education teachers interviewed, some students in inclusion classes do not need to be there; they do not require additional support. Other students are struggling in on-level classes and general education teachers suggested that some could benefit from a move to an inclusion setting. The Special Education Teacher from Middle School C explained how system constraints impacted her placement decision when contemplating a student move out of special education:

In middle school, changing a schedule is not that big a deal; in high school it’s a bigger deal. Even in middle school it could mean a different teacher not just a different period during the day. Sometimes we can swap like this but sometimes all the classes are just turned upside down, and I say I would just rather them be in a team taught class and not need the help and after they get there [high school] and if they are still successful, then you can take it out of the IEP.

As the Math Teacher from High School Y put it, “Kids are never moved [to another level or to another class] . . . because of scheduling.” In response to the excessive measure of bureaucracy in their schools, teachers were hesitant to remove students from inclusion settings, regardless of their level of success. These scheduling constraints appear to impact the disabled students’ “failure to return” to general education.
Caught between a rock and a hard place

Special education teachers expressed frustration with the IEP process. Teachers feel forced to consider options for placement settings that are not available at their schools, or feel pressured to provide accommodations that teachers know are unrealistic. The Special Education Teacher from Middle School B suggested that special education “overpromises and under delivers”:

As a field we have over promised what we can do and we are not always honest with ourselves and with what we are telling people we can do; an IEP process is a pretty good example. We come up with this broad plan and in reality we know when we are sitting there we can’t do it . . . at least to the extent that we are letting on.

The Special Education Teacher from High School X expressed similar sentiments:

I have not been in special education that long but I actually see the laws that are there to protect and help those students as hurting them. Your hands are so tied as to how you can help them. It bothers me that students work so hard, come to school every day, work to the best of their ability and will never be able to earn a clear high school diploma, and that bothers me.

Teachers, particularly general education teachers, spoke about their dissatisfaction with the Response to Intervention process (RTI). During the RTI process, which must occur prior to special education eligibility consideration, students deemed unsuccessful are identified and placed on a four-tiered system that includes careful monitoring of teacher interventions and student outcomes. The Math Teacher from Middle School A expressed her frustration with the bureaucracy in the RTI process:

I’m a professional; treat me like one. If strategies and accommodations are not making a difference then let’s act on this issue and don’t delay for six to eight weeks, but let’s act on it so that kids can get what they need. The runaround has become so great that we are losing sight of what is truly in the best interest of kids sometimes, which is very frustrating.
The Special Education Teacher from High School X had similar reservations about the process:

At this point, RTI would take almost a year for them to go through and they would have already missed an entire year. . . . They would have failed an entire year! They are going to end up in a teamed class anyway. I don’t see how it would help them by going through the whole process.”

The Math Teacher from Middle School C expressed disappointment that it took so long for a student to be identified:

He was just in speech, and I’m not sure how he lasted this long. In my small class he stands out. When he comes to class it’s almost like it’s the first time he has ever done a math problem. I’ll teach him a math problem and then tell him to try this one and it’s like he has never seen it before. . . . It’s bizarre. His mom, unfortunately, bless her heart, has been trying to get him tested. He got tested a couple of years ago and didn’t make the scores, so he has actually just been placed this year. Unfortunately, you have to collect so much data and it takes so much time.

Faced with system constraints, from lack of placement alternatives to the RTI process, teachers felt limited in their abilities to assist students who were not being successful in their classes.

However, as the Special Education Teacher from High School X admitted, many of these students, both special education and general education, will still end up in the same inclusion classroom, receiving the same services and accommodations whether they are in special education or not.

**Theme 4: Despite Good Intentions**

*Teachers recognize that special education may come at a cost.*

Although all teachers maintained that special education meets a significant need, there were a few criticisms nonetheless. In fact, the Special Education Teacher from Middle School B compared the results of special education to the adverse effects that often result from well-intended medical interventions:
There is a word iatrogenic. . . . An example found in the medical field would be you go into the hospital to have elective surgery and you end up with some other unexpected, unintended result. Special ed is often the same way in my opinion. We meet a student with a learning disability or autism and so they come to us with this problem and then while they are in special education they end up with behavioral issues, or emotional issues. Or, because we have not set the bar as high as we could, the student has not made academic achievements that they would otherwise have made. I see both sides of that coin.

Special education teachers consistently maintained that small group settings lead to behavior problems. Teachers reported that students in small group settings are more likely to misbehave and less likely to learn more appropriate behaviors. The Special Education Teacher from Middle School B reported that many of the students he teaches have been in small group classes together since elementary school:

A lot of our kids have spent years if not their whole lives in small group classes and they are just not prepared for our expectations in general. Some of them don’t even know how a gen ed class operates. I would say from my experience small group leads to behavioral problems more than team taught. One reason may be the students have fewer role models. If one student in the class is misbehaving then that becomes the role model for the other students.

The importance of positive student role models was a constant refrain, and, according to teacher responses, students in small group settings do not have access to positive role models. In contrast, teachers reported that students in inclusion settings have more positive role models and these role models encourage and support appropriate behaviors. In addition, special education teachers suggested that special education students in inclusion settings may be less likely to act out and draw attention to themselves for fear of identifying themselves as disabled.

Although a few teachers did recognize the short-term disadvantages that may go along with special education services and placement, such as the behavior consequences for small group students or the unintended outcomes that may result from the IEP process itself, few teachers spoke about the long-term consequences of special education for disabled students.
In summary, four broad themes emerged regarding special education:

Theme 1: Disability as Deficit--Teachers respond to disabled students from a medical perspective.

Theme 2: Leveling the Playing Field--Teachers believe that special education can and should compensate for individual deficit.

Theme 3: System Constraints--Teachers suggest that special education decisions are often made in response to district realities instead of student needs.

Theme 4: Despite Good Intentions--Teachers recognize that special education may come at a cost.
Figure 5. Teacher understandings about student capital.
Theme 5: Recipes for Success

*Teachers believe that students can be successful if they have supportive parents,*
*are motivated and hard working, and advocate for themselves.*

**Parent support.** Successful students, according to teacher responses, are a result of considerable parent support. This suggestion was consistent throughout; all teachers interviewed talked about the importance of parent support. Teachers associated parent support with student success, much in the same way they equated disability with deficit. The Special Education Teacher from High School X summed up the understandings of all the teachers:

The students that are successful are the students that have good parental support. You can tell which students do not have parental support, you can just tell. You can see it very quickly.

Throughout the interview process, teachers spoke about the grade reporting system, Acme (a pseudonym), that parents and students can access with an internet connection and a password. Teachers suggested that parents who care use Acme regularly to monitor their child’s progress. The Special Education Teacher from Middle School B commented:

It is fairly clear that when parents contact you and are looking at Acme, these kids tend to do much better at school. It is probably a complex web of interactions but for the most part that’s what I see in terms of kids that are successful. Kids that are not successful tend to have little or no support at home.

Parent support impacts student success and, in addition, parent intervention at school appears to be an effective change agent. Teachers indicated that parents are able to accomplish things at school that teachers cannot. The Math Teacher from High School Y reported that it was unnecessary to make special education referrals at her school because “Parents do it here; we don’t have to. They do direct parent referrals.” In addition to referrals, parents also influence classroom placement options. The Math Teacher from High School X reported:
We have a parent who came in and said, “My kid is never going to pass in the regular classroom.” So, they pulled him and maybe three or four others and I guess they made a small group class; a special ed teacher is teaching it.

The Special Education Teacher from High School Z also spoke about the way in which the persistence of one particular parent had paid off for her child:

She graduated last year and she was on my caseload. When she started out her freshman year in Algebra I Part 1, I told her parents she probably should be in Integrated (a lower level math course). She was pretty low and she just didn’t do well. But, her parents fought and fought and kept her in Algebra I. She struggled in part 1, failed part 2 and had to retake it, passed geometry with a gift, and then made an 88 in Algebra 2.

This particular student was able to pass the required math courses to receive a college preparatory diploma, but just barely. The fact that she “passed geometry with a gift,” speaks to the power and influence of parents. High school teachers also reported that when students are misplaced or need to be moved to another course requiring a schedule change, parents get involved and the changes that need to be made are accomplished.

Teachers from High School Y, a diverse and less affluent school, noted that although less parent involvement may be evident, at least they met many parents of special education students when they came for annual IEP meetings. The Special Education Teacher from High School Y suggested that teachers and schools need to be more supportive of parents in order to encourage and foster greater parent involvement:

In trying to call parents and keep up with your contact logs, most of the numbers you are calling have changed--Dominoes, they used to work there a year ago, not the right number, so complicated. The parents? It’s a combination of both, not caring and too busy. It’s hard to care when you’ve got three jobs. I can’t even imagine but I don’t know what’s to be done. I don’t know how; we need to be more supportive of the parents.

Although this teacher seemed to appreciate the complexity of these situations, many teachers failed to question the bureaucratic practices that limit opportunities for students without financial resources. This was evident in teacher conversations about summer school. When questioning
the way in which pass/fail decisions are made about borderline students, the Math Teacher from High School Y, when asked about what happens to students that fail freshman math, responded: “Unfortunately, they fail math then. You can go to summer school but its $600 and I really doubt that most of the parents will pay it. They’ll have to repeat next year.” Undoubtedly, when parents are less vocal and demanding, when parents are unable to communicate effectively and comfortably with school personnel, or when the financial resources to pay for summer school or extra tutoring opportunities do not exist, students with the least amount of capital suffer.

Student success and behavior may suffer when students without effective support systems assume adult responsibilities, according to the Math Teacher from Middle School C. She spoke about how much she enjoys her current teaching situation where “kids are allowed to behave like kids.” At her previous school in a college town, she reported that there were more numerous and more significant discipline problems. She attributed this to a lack of parental involvement that resulted in kids growing up too fast and too soon:

Most of the kids there were living in the projects. They were living with Grandma because Mom and Dad or somebody was in jail, and when they went home education was not the top priority. “I have to take care of my three year old brother, and I have to make dinner for everybody because mom’s at work.” They have adult lives at home; they were the caretakers. So when they come to school and someone like me is telling them what they need to do and they are used to running things at home, it’s not gonna go over very well. Here, they’re just what regular kids should be like. They’re allowed to be regular kids at home, more middle class.

According to the teachers interviewed, level and type of parent involvement is a significant indicator of student success or failure. In addition, active parent involvement appears to impact school and teacher decisions. As a result, students without active parent involvement at school miss out on opportunities that students with more involved parents enjoy.
Student motivation and work ethic. Motivation and work ethic came up more often in teacher conversations than any other phrases or expression. All teachers, regardless of level or responsibility, repeatedly commented that the primary reason students in their inclusion classrooms were not being successful was because they did not care, they did not work hard and their attendance was poor. According to the Special Education Teacher from High School X,

Successful students attend regularly, complete homework and class work, pay attention in class; those are the kids that end up being successful. There’s an equal number of boys and girls that choose to succeed based on work habits; same number that choose not to. Work habits are the key.

The Math Teacher from Middle School A maintained that her highest achievers are girls, and “this is due to work ethic.” Work ethic was also equally important to the Math Teacher from High School Y when she spoke about one of her students:

He is the most focused student I have ever taught and he currently has a 96 in my class. He is ADD but takes no medication. He does have some difficulties but he’s a real hard worker; that’s why he’s doing so well in my class.

Motivation and desire to succeed impact work ethic and are equally important. The Special Education Teacher from High School Y expressed her belief that,

In every class we have those students that no matter what the distractions are they are still going to get their work done. If they have any questions they are still going to come to us. If they have questions, we know they care about their education; they value it.

Teachers suggested that successful students go beyond the minimum requirements. The Special Education Teacher from High School X remarked that one disabled student was particularly successful because, “What makes him different is the motivation. That makes all the difference.”

The Math Teacher from Middle School C described a successful student as “not just the ones that do their homework but those that go the extra mile and check their answers.”

Motivation certainly impacts work ethic, but teachers also contend that lack of motivation often causes students, both special education and general education, to misbehave and shut
down. The Special Education Teacher from High School Y expressed her frustration with students who give up:

One student in particular, he is EBD (emotionally/behavior disordered) and he shuts down completely at any task, even if it’s a group task, even if he can work with his group members. The other day he asked me if he could take a zero instead of doing his assignment. The value of grades means nothing and the repercussions are not in play either, so it’s a double edged sword.

All teachers consistently maintained that the reason special education students were not successful was not because of their disability, but because they lacked motivation and work ethic and did not take advantage of special education supports and opportunities. Teachers, time and again, reported that special education students just do not have the drive to be successful. The Special Education Teacher from Middle School C felt that her biggest challenge was “those kids that just don’t care.” The Special Education Teacher from Middle School A also expressed his frustration with students who do not do their part: “It’s probably special ed; it’s motivation. You can tell them, “If you fail this test [CRCT], you are not going to high school,” and they still don’t care. They don’t even need you.” This same teacher was convinced that any disabled student could be successful:

I believe I can get 95% of those kids to a 70 if they work with me, but it’s unbelievable how many kids have failed this year because they just don’t do anything. Every year here I’m getting more and they just drive you crazy.

Yet, in spite of considerable frustration, he seemed determined to understand and undo this indifference:

Our kids, getting them to care and being concerned, it’s probably worse for you [in high school]. Most of them have been in special ed for so many years, they’ve just been beat up and they are over it. I think our challenge is just to get them happy again. Not only are we trying to teach them the math, but we’ve got to get their self esteem and confidence up. You can tell, they’re like ‘I’m special ed’ and that’s what I think my biggest challenge is. . . .
This perception that students “don’t care” has an impact on teachers. Teachers seemed less likely to bend over backwards for students who just did not seem to care. The Math Teacher from Middle School C underscored the impact of student motivation and work ethic on her decisions:

These students that were not working needed a reality check and they needed to step up. They just weren’t taking advantage of opportunities. I wasn’t going to help them because they weren’t helping themselves.

Her co-teacher also reluctantly admitted, “I’m done with some of them. They won’t stay for extra help, they won’t come in early, they won’t do anything to help themselves.” When questioned about adding additional accommodations for a disabled student who lacked motivation and work ethic, the Math Teacher from High School X expressed similar sentiments:

Well, how about changing the attitude of the student? They always turn it back on us. . . . “Well, what can you do? Well, what can the kid do? How much more can we do for the kid?” It’s all about effort. When you have zeros for class work and it counts as a completion grade? I understand if they are not passing the tests, that’s the hardest part. But, when I look back at their homework grades and their class work grades and they don’t do it, there’s no excuse for that as far as I am concerned.

When students appear to care, teachers responded very differently. In fact, teachers seemed more willing to modify or suggest additional student accommodations when students were making an effort. The Math Teacher from High School X, who had earlier seemed unwilling to add an accommodation for an underachieving student, was eager to accommodate a motivated, hard working student. IEPs often include accommodations for extended time for testing and generally specify the amount of extended time and same day testing. This Math Teacher acknowledged that some students finish their tests the next day instead of the same day as normally expected:

I almost feel like it’s to my advantage to see who goes home that night and has looked at the test and studies again. I don’t know if that’s considered cheating and I don’t care; they don’t have the test in front of them. They at least can see “maybe I need to brush up
on standard deviation before I go in to finish up tomorrow.” I figure if they go home and
look at it, I’m ok with that because it’s showing that they put forth the effort. Ok, they
finally do understand how to do standard deviation, or whatever it is. Those who still
don’t know what they’re doing and don’t want their test back to finish, I don’t get it.

Motivation and work ethic also played a part in teacher decisions about class placement.
When teachers were questioned about the students they would recommend for the math support
class, an elective course designed to improve achievement in a required math course, both high
school and middle school teachers consistently described the same students. The Special
Education Teacher from Middle School A summed up the responses of all the teachers
questioned when she said,

I would not recommend support for kids that are not going to really work hard and take
advantage of the extra help. Support is for anybody who is going to work hard and take
advantage of it.

All teachers, but high school teachers particularly, were quick to point out that passing or
failing a class should primarily represent whether the student had mastered the standards of the
course. According to the Special Education Teacher from High School Z, “passing is no longer
about effort alone.” However, when faced with passing or failing a student that did not fare so
well, motivation and work ethic played a significant role in the decision-making process for
some of the teachers. The Special Education Teacher from High School Y commented that, “I
look at test scores, but I make it easy to pass . . . extra credit; they can make up anything they
miss.” Other teachers looked at factors such as homework grades, if they worked in class or slept
in class, or if they showed consistent effort throughout the semester, when deciding whether to
pass or fail a student. The Math Teacher from High School Z spoke at length about a student
who passed primarily due to individual effort:

We had one student last spring. She is a senior this year and I think her final average was
a 66. She worked all semester. She worked her tail off; she really did. She asked a lot of
questions; very active, very hyper, social, but still worked very hard. Most of them [that
don’t do well] it’s work, but she just didn’t do well. She was really, really upset. She wasn’t going to be able to cheer and she called us and said, ‘Is there any way I can come and retake my final?’ So, she came up here during summer school and she had one or two weeks to study. So we said, “Fine, get somebody to help you study and whatever grade you get on the final you will get.” Well, she made a 67 but we passed her anyway. She is not going to be a math person and we get that, but we’ve moved away from that whole ‘A for effort’ type of deal. We’re moving away from that; we can’t count homework very much. I’m sorry but there is a bit of an incentive there for those kids that don’t do well on tests.

Not all teachers felt the same way about effort. In fact, the Special Education Teacher from High School Y felt differently. When making pass/fail decisions and considering student effort, the teacher commented:

We look at that . . . benchmarks and unit tests to see if they understood the standards. If you don’t, then no; we don’t socially promote in high school. Those days are gone. That’s why they’re in the trouble they’re in now because they have been socially promoted at elementary and then middle and put in a grade level where they don’t have the background knowledge they need to be successful. So no, you can’t do that.

Middle school teachers seemed more likely pass a student if they “did what they were supposed to do.” In fact, the Math Teacher from Middle School A expressed concerns about using “numbers” alone to determine proficiency:

That’s where I have frustration with high school. Because, I feel like for them it’s whatever’s in the computer is in the computer. I say that because I’ve had two kids go through there; a 68 or 69 will stay. It doesn’t matter who you are or what you’ve done. I think you should be looking at the big picture and the individual child and the overall effect that number’s gonna have. The child who never does anything, they’ve got zeros and those things, I look and go ‘Well, you earned that 68.’ If you had done every homework assignment or made some kind of effort then I could see doing it, making it a 70.

Her special education co-teacher expressed similar sentiments:

Do they try or do they not try? Do they have most of the assignments? Do they ask questions? I don’t necessarily look at did they come in early for extra help or stay late, because that’s on the parents. It would be nice to say there is a science to it [grades], but there’s not. I like to see if they put an effort in. If I can search and find anything this kid did, then typically I like to give them the boost. There are some kids that sit in here and do nothing, they come in here with no books and no pencils and end up with a 69. You’re staying at a 69 because you did nothing for me. I can usually find something in
everybody. . . “Remember that one time when you wrote something down?” But, there are times when you can’t find one thing. You fill out the paperwork for the IEP and it asks for strengths and you are like ‘Oh man, and you can’t even say participates.’ They will stay at a 69.

The Special Education Teacher from Middle School C also urged educators to look at the bigger picture and not rely on numbers alone:

Who really needs a cut and dry score? I almost look at it like the CRCT; you have to score an 800 to pass. Well, you have some kids that will score a 798 that know more than those that will score 802 . . . 802 had a lucky day, 798 didn’t feel so well. If we look beyond those numbers, you start getting a bigger picture. It’s not just a snapshot of how they did on this particular measure on this particular day. . . . There is all the information we have gathered; it’s really a benefit.

The co-teachers from Middle School C were both on the same page. The Math Teacher commented, “Consistent effort is what goes through my mind; I will, I bump up 68s, 69s, 79s and 89s.” The Special Education Teacher from Middle School B made it clear that he would not change a grade, just to change a grade. However, just like the other teachers, he was willing to provide additional student opportunities if the student was willing to put forth effort:

My view is that special education does not guarantee grades and whatever is in the book is what you earn. I won’t change that grade, but I won’t let that grade stop me from recommending passing or going into an on-level class. I can’t predict how you are going to grow; what’s going to happen over the summer. Are you going to mature, are you going to come back a better student or more interested? I am not going to cut off your choices but I am not going to raise your grade. I might provide you with an extra assignment in order to give you an opportunity to pull your grade up. But, I won’t make a 69 a 70. To me, it ties back into that dishonesty. We claim we are going to do all this stuff and we can’t do everything we promise to do; we don’t have the resources and we don’t have the time. It is a form of dishonesty to bump the grades.

How to account for differences in effort, motivation, ability, and grades? These are all challenges teachers face within their professional lives.
Student advocacy. Special education and general education teachers, in high schools particularly, placed emphasis on the importance of student advocacy. Student advocacy is closely related to motivation and work ethic, and when students speak up for themselves, teachers listen. Teachers seem to assume that students who advocate for themselves work harder and care more about their education. When students take responsibility for their own education, they get the help they need. The Math Teacher from Middle School C reported that she expects students to speak up and encourages self-advocacy:

We do a lot of group work where we do a problem on the board and students work on white boards at their desks. I’ll call out five people that have it right and then we say, “Get up and get help!” The ones that get up right away because they don’t have the answer, those are the ones I see as being successful. The ones where we have to go over and say “Please get up, get up” . . . these kids need to be held accountable. They need to say, ‘I can’t do this, so I need to get up and get help and be accountable.

Student advocacy impacts teacher decisions in the same way that motivation and work ethic do. The Math Teacher from Middle School A was more likely to go the extra mile for students who speak up for themselves:

I tell students they can come in during homeroom every single day. I will look over their assignments with them and I give them opportunities, especially the first half of the school year, to correct mistakes and earn points. It’s all about learning the skills. We’re trying to build up those skills and teach them to be a self advocate. If there’s something you want, you ask. The worst thing you are going to get is a “no.” And, sometimes you will get a no, but it never hurts to ask and it is up to you. So, for the students that are learning to advocate for themselves, if they are at a 69, I would say, “What have they done? How many opportunities did they take?” and those kids that have, I will move to a 70.

Parent support, motivation and work ethic, and student advocacy are qualities, or student capital, that teachers admire in the students they teach. From teachers’ perspectives, the more student capital a student has the more successful the student will be, and the greater influence these students may have on teachers. Students who lack these qualities may be considerably less successful and at a considerable disadvantage in the school setting.
Theme 6: The Elephant in the Classroom

*Teachers were hesitant to speak about race and careful to protect the identities of their students.*

Teachers were intentionally asked to describe the minority students in their classrooms in order to gain an understanding about teacher appraisal of student capital. Teachers were, for the most part, unwilling to address these questions directly. The teachers from Middle School A did report that some of their African American students have weak academic skills, are less motivated, and lack significant parent involvement. The teachers from High School X also reported that Hispanic students witness their parents working, without a high school or college education, and do not see why they need an education. Again, however, most teachers were reluctant to speak specifically about minority students at all, even when questioned pointedly. This silence and unwillingness to address the issue of minority student achievement and behavior is noteworthy. Only one teacher, the Math Teacher from High School Y, spoke purposely about race. Her comments seem to shed light on what many other teachers may have been thinking:

> I feel inappropriate talking about this [race]. In a class of 35, there might be two White kids. I do feel the White kids act differently, but I shouldn’t be saying this. I hate to sound racist.

This same teacher also reported that “Whites are in the minority at my school and they are stereotyped as being the smartest, but that’s not true.”

Students placed in special education classrooms have been identified and evaluated and are considered disabled. However, similar to the silence surrounding race, teachers did not appear altogether comfortable with discussions about disability either. Special education teachers and their general education co-teachers maintained that they take extraordinary measures to protect the identities of the disabled students in their classrooms. Although confidentiality is
certainly an IDEA requirement under the law, the Special Education Teacher from Middle School B emphasized that “we go to great lengths to maintain confidentiality.” The Math Teacher from High School X was also quick to point out that she and her co-teacher also “try very hard not to let them (the students in their classroom) know who is sped and who is not.” Teachers do such a good job of this that the Math Teacher from High School Y commented that “most kids (special education and general education) don’t even know they are in a special education class.”

Although well-intended, these teacher attempts to “hide” the identities of their disabled students to further reinforce the conflation of disability with deficit, and teachers are not the only ones keeping a secret. Teachers reported that some students do not even know they are in special education because their parents do not tell them. Although most parents seem willing to speak with their children about difference (not deficit), most teachers seemed to suggest that this was not explicit enough. The Special Education Teacher from Middle School A remarked:

We’ve still got kids who don’t know they’re special ed and they are in the eighth grade! We tell them ‘everybody has IEPs, everybody has weaknesses.’ Their parents don’t want to tell them yet. They [special education students] are required to attend their IEPs for the first time in the eighth grade and it is really weird.

This teacher seemed unwilling to address student identity and disability head on. Yet, at the same time, he found it hard to believe that a parent would “lie to their kid” about their special education diagnosis. In addition, when referrals to special education were likely, he remarked that “I would hope they [parents] get where we’re going with this.” Teachers, particularly special education teachers, expend considerable energy negotiating competing, often contradictory, professional demands. They strive to be sensitive to students and parents regarding disability issues, while simultaneously meeting the objectivity requirements imposed by the medicalized, special education discourse.

134
Teachers also contend that disabled students try to hide their own identities to avoid attention or exposure. Responding to a question about the behavior of disabled students, the Math Teacher from Middle School C felt strongly that disabled students are “the most well-behaved [students] because they don’t want to stand out as much. Their defense mechanism for not knowing the material is, ‘I’m not going to act out and call attention to myself; I don’t want her to call on me.’” The Special Education Teacher from High School X suggested that special education students that do act out “are not able to achieve success so they just act out as avoidance because they can’t be successful.” Students act out as a last resort; an appeal for teacher interventions that work. Disabled students find themselves in a precarious situation; advocating for independence discloses the disability they are trying to hide.

Interviews indicated that teachers value parent support, motivation and work ethic, and student advocacy. Students who possess significant student capital appear to have greater influence on teachers than do students with less student capital, and are subsequently more successful in school, as a result. The fact that teachers were reluctant to speak about race and careful to “hide” the identities of disabled students speaks to the challenges teachers face. When teachers fail to address these issues directly, they unintentionally send a message that reinforces deficit assumptions and limits student capital.

In summary, two broad themes emerged regarding student capital:

Theme 5: Recipes for Success--Teachers believe that students can be successful if they have supportive parents, are motivated and hard working, and advocate for themselves.

Theme 6: The Elephant in the Classroom--Teachers were hesitant to speak about race and careful to protect the identities of their students.
Teacher Professionalism

Figure 6. Teacher understandings about teacher professionalism.

Theme 7: Teachers are Committed to Students and Their Learning

Student/teacher relationships are limited by bureaucracy and enhanced through teacher autonomy.

Based on interviews regarding professional identity, it was clear that all teachers are committed to the students they teach, and value student/teacher interactions and individual student attention. The discourse that elevates student/teacher relationships above other teaching responsibilities impacts teacher decisions, while at the same time increasing teacher frustrations.
The Special Education Teacher from Middle School C commented about the importance of relationships with her students: “Successful kids have a positive relationship with an adult. If I have a good relationship with them, and I usually do, I can get them to do anything . . . I earn their trust.”

*Bureaucracy.* Because teachers’ value the time they spend interacting with students, teacher frustration is at an all-time high due to bureaucratic demands that leave little time to foster these important relationships. Excessive testing and a singular focus on standards-based instruction were demands that all teachers complained incessantly about. Although teachers recognize that accountability is necessary, teachers agreed with the sentiments expressed by the Special Education Teacher from High School X:

There is the need for accountability but I think we’re getting to the point where we are no longer helping the students in public schools. We’re so tied up with accountability and paper work that the time is just not there to spend with the student, and that is what you want to do.

Middle school teachers spoke about the CRCT, testing designed to measure student achievement relative to the Performance Standards, and high school teachers spoke about End of Course tests in core subject areas and the High School Graduation Tests that must be passed in order to receive a high school diploma. Teachers maintained that testing and numbers have become more important than the students themselves. The Math Teacher from High School X commented, “They’re looking at the numbers; It’s all about the numbers.” The Special Education Teacher from Middle School B voiced similar concerns when he noted, “This insipid focus on measuring achievement has had a negative impact on the teaching profession. I can’t take advantage of a teachable moment anymore.” This same teacher spoke about the downside of focusing solely on standards:
We are told, “Start with the standard, Don’t vary from the standard, Don’t say anything that’s not tied to the standard or you are wasting time. Make sure, above all else, that they are prepared for the test.” That’s all we care about. We’re not a business in the traditional sense of the word, a manufacturer where you can examine every stage of the manufacturing process and make sure every stage is exactly the same and perfect. Human learning doesn’t happen that way; business does not always apply to education. Human learning is not like manufacturing.

Meeting arbitrary criteria on standardized tests has resulted in this preoccupation that results in excessive preparation to meet these standards and unhealthy pressure to measure up. As the Special Education teacher from High School X put it:

All we hear about, at every meeting and in service, is individualized instruction and differentiation, that’s all they talk about. But, in reality, there’s just standardized everything and only one kind of test that everybody cares about: standardized tests.

Accountability extends beyond testing and standards, and includes unnecessary paperwork and unwarranted data collection demands. Excessive accountability has resulted in teacher responsibilities that are hard to keep up with and interfere with what is important to teachers: students. Representative comments included the following:

- Too much paperwork, data! Can’t we just teach? Don’t you just trust us enough to let us go into our rooms and teach these kids? What do they do with the data anyway? There is so much paperwork, so much data collection just to show what? I don’t ever see anything being done with data. Like, what are we learning from it? (Math Teacher from High School Z)

- The paperwork gets more and more every year; throwing all this stuff on our plates and not taking anything off. I just find it so pointless. Where did all this come from? This takes up all my time and nobody even looks at it! Do this, keep data on this, have data team meetings on this; how does this help the kids? (Special Education Teacher from Middle School A)

- We are overwhelmed . . . paperwork, lesson plans, unit plans, data teams. I became a teacher to work with kids, and teaching is only about 20% of my job nowadays. (Math Teacher from High School X).

- I’m going to make sure to take care of my kids because that’s what’s important, but all that I’m required to do by the district? . . . Whether its lesson plans, this notebook or that notebook, learning plans, collaboration, everything I spend easily 90% of my time doing. . . .That’s why I work with my kids before school and after school,
because that’s the only time I have to help them. Paperwork is making teachers less effective. (Special Education Teacher from High School X)

This excessive accountability has resulted in schools that lack flexibility and provide little opportunity for teachers to spend quality time with students or other teachers. The Special Education Teacher from High School X expressed frustration with the lack of time to collaborate:

Even though we talk about collaboration, teachers do not have enough time because of accountability. I do think that teachers would like to collaborate and I think they have a lot of great ideas that would help students, but we are not able to implement them.

The Special Education Teacher from Middle School C expressed her desire for more flexibility:

This is our home and our home is very different from your home, and what we need here is very different from what you need. I think we get too rigid in the public schools; every student must take these classes this way and finish by this time. . . . Everybody must master this by the date of the CRCT, by the date of the EOCT, by the date of the graduation test . . . I understand raising the bar, I understand the importance of the core curriculum, but we need to be flexible.

All teachers commented about the importance of having two teachers in the classroom; two teachers mean more attention for each student, and more time to develop deeper and more meaningful relationships with students.

Teachers chose the teaching profession in order to work with students (not numbers) and make a difference. Teachers expressed frustration because excessive accountability demands interfere with student/teacher relationships.

Autonomy. Because teachers value student/teacher relationships, they recognize the importance of teacher autonomy in the classroom. Teacher autonomy came up repeatedly in discussions of classroom discipline. Teachers consistently reported that they prefer to handle discipline problems themselves, maintaining that they alone are in the best position to manage
student behavior. These teachers make every effort to develop strong relationships with their students and believe that involving administration in matters of classroom discipline would undermine their efforts. According to the Math Teacher from Middle School A,

We don’t have big issues here because we have good relationships with our kids. I treat them like my own children. I have no problem getting in their face and they know it and their parents know it.

Although teachers maintained that discipline managed within the classroom generally results in more positive relationships, this was not always the only impetus behind these disciplinary decisions. Some teachers maintained that it is just easier and more efficient to deal with behavior inside the classroom. The Math Teacher from Middle School A commented:

We don’t do lots of citations or carry them to the office. . . . It’s more work on us in the long run, and it’s more paperwork and documentation. That doesn’t work anyway. What does work is a look, a tone, a “Do you really want to take me on?”

Teachers reported that they handle most student infractions by contacting parents and conferencing with student’s one on one. However, all teachers commented that there are certain behaviors for which they have no choice but to involve administration. These include threats, bullying, offenses of a sexual or racial nature, or physical altercations.

Some teachers maintained that they handle their own discipline because administration does not follow through. The Math teacher from High School Y commented, “I feel like some of the administrators do not have our backs and we are expected to do so much.” This teacher struggled with discipline but was hesitant to seek outside support for fear that she would be perceived as ineffective. The Math Teacher from High School X, who had also experienced significant behavior issues within her classroom, expressed her frustration with the administration at her school:

We avoid sending kids to the office because there is no follow through. Administrators never tell us what they do after we refer kids. I have nightmares about this class. . . . I
don’t sleep. It would make me feel better to know other people are having problems too. They keep us in the dark about our students.

Other teachers reported that in spite of strong administrative support at their schools, they still prefer to handle discipline on their own in order to maintain student/teacher relationships.

Theme 8: Lots of Responsibility, Very Little Respect

*Teachers expressed frustration about public and professional regard.*

General education and special education teachers seem to have a love/hate relationship with teaching; too many responsibilities, too little time and very little respect. More than one teacher expressed frustration about the lack of respect shown to teachers both publicly and privately, and the Special Education Teacher from Middle School C suggested that teachers are partly to blame for this lack of respect:

> We’ve brought it on ourselves. I mean when you talk about the number of hours teachers put in and don’t get paid for it, well we’ve always just done it. Fortune 500 companies, those people aren’t going to do that. They are going to walk out when its time and they’re going to say, “What’s my compensation/benefits package if I stay and do this?” But, because we haven’t asked those questions, we do it and we’re expected to do it. It’s almost demanded of us at times. The more we think we are professional, the more people will treat us that way. We have to learn to stand up for ourselves”

This same teacher said she spends considerable energy getting people to understand what I do and respect my profession. I have heard, “Well, she’s just a teacher,” that kind of thing. Well, do you realize the kinds of things teachers actually do, and the differences they make daily in children’s lives?

The Math Teacher from High School Y suggested that the negative portrayal of teachers in the media down South has an effect on students as well when she remarked,

> Reading the newspaper down here, you would think that anybody can be a teacher. Well, yeah, maybe anybody can be a teacher, but not anybody can be a good teacher. Kids seem to respect teachers much more up North than they do here. Kids hear the media too and that’s one reason for their lack of respect.
General education and special education teachers both reported that even within their schools, they feel at times like they are being treated like students.

The role of and regard for special education teachers was a topic of discussion among these teachers as well. Special education teachers in particular spoke about their changing roles and the frustrations they feel on a daily basis. Additional general education responsibilities have been added to the plates of special educators and they are feeling additional pressures. More than one special education teacher commented that they do the job of two teachers now, a content teacher and a special education teacher. The Special Education Teacher from High School X said, “I don’t even feel like a special education teacher anymore.” However, increased recognition and respect has not come with increased responsibilities, according to the teachers interviewed. Special education teachers reported that they still do not have direct access to student grades and must rely on the content teacher to share information. As the Special Education Teacher from High School X put it, “We, just like our kids, are not quite good enough. They [administration] don’t trust you enough.”

When discussing the issue of teacher respect, the Special Education Teacher from Middle School B suggested that some special education teachers deserve their poor professional reputations. He maintained that,

Often, also, small group teachers frankly are the poorer teachers, at least in terms of classroom management, at some schools. They don’t have the classroom management skills to reduce or eliminate problem behavior.

In terms of academic qualifications, The Special Education Teacher from High School Y reported that a highly qualified social studies special education teacher at her school was currently teaching a small group math class, without any experience or highly qualified status in math. When the Special Education Teacher from Middle School B was questioned about the
quality of small group teachers, he responded that “Teaching is either the hardest or the easiest job you will ever have.”

When teachers lack professional respect, other teachers may be unwilling to work with them. The Math Teacher from Middle School C suggested that general education teachers are often hesitant to work with special education teachers because they have a reputation for lacking content knowledge. This teacher spoke from experience because she used to be a general education teacher herself.

This lack of professional regard, particularly for special education teachers, leads some teachers to hide their own professional identities. The Math Teacher from Middle School C described her co-teaching situation in this way:

I don’t think the kids realize who the special ed teacher is because we are so back and forth and it just happens so naturally. She will teach an entire class period and I will be the one that walks around helping and then we’ll switch it off. I think it’s good that they don’t know; we have told them that we have so many kids we have to have another teacher.

Most Special Education Teachers seemed conflicted about their professional identities. They seemed proud of the expertise they bring to the classroom, yet at the same time, they seemed to minimize the significance of these responsibilities.

Interviews regarding professional identity indicated that teachers are committed to their students and their success; teachers’ value personal attention and student/teacher relationships and make decisions based on this discourse. Teachers are frustrated with the bureaucracy that limits their interactions and quality time with students. In addition, teachers prefer to handle discipline within the classroom, and suggest that classroom autonomy fosters student/teacher relationships. Teachers also expressed frustration with the lack of public respect. Special
education teachers are particularly discouraged about their changing roles and professional regard.

In summary, two broad themes emerged regarding teacher professionalism:

Theme 7: Teachers are Committed to Students and Their Learning--Student/teacher relationships are limited by bureaucracy and enhanced through teacher autonomy.

Theme 8: Lots of Responsibility, Very Little Respect--Teachers expressed frustration about public and professional regard.

Based on conversations with teachers, eight broad themes emerged in response to the research questions. These themes spoke to teacher understandings about deficit, special education, and conceptions of teacher professionalism. Findings further indicated that teachers are challenged to make sense of these discourses within professional contexts. A discussion and analysis of the research findings is presented in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Today, teachers in inclusion settings face new and significant challenges. General education teachers, once considered primarily subject area experts, are now expected to be knowledgeable about special education policy and specialized instruction. Special education teachers are challenged to be “highly qualified” in academic content areas in addition to fulfilling their responsibilities as support personnel. Demands on teachers have never been greater. In 2004, Kaff surveyed hundreds of special educators to investigate the relationship between workplace factors and teacher attrition. Half of the teachers surveyed reported that they did not plan to remain in the field of special education, citing three primary reasons: administrative support, classroom issues, and personal issues. Teachers were dissatisfied because they did not have time to teach; their added roles and responsibilities were getting in the way. Kaff pointed out that “Many special educators are simply asked to fill too many different roles . . . to be a ‘Jack or Jill of all trades, and master of none’” (p. 16).

I began this investigation because of my concern for special education students, particularly African American students. In spite of the reality of overrepresentation, the impact of teachers in middle and high school classrooms has received little attention. As a special education teacher, I have witnessed disproportionality firsthand; I have observed disproportionality in inclusion classrooms and in segregated settings. On numerous occasions I have also experienced disappointment, sadness, and even anger upon learning that a Black male student, perceived as dangerous or disruptive by school officials, had been suspended from
school. Most teachers care deeply for their students and contemplate any student decision carefully and responsibly. However, dominant discourses influence teacher assumptions and, consequently, these discourses may perpetuate the status quo. It is precisely because teacher decisions and understandings about students are such complex phenomenon, that I wanted to explore the discourses that teachers in inclusion settings draw upon to understand the students they teach. My hope at the outset of this investigation was that teachers who work with students of color and students with disabilities might come to view their work in new and more meaningful ways, with greater awareness about the ways in which their decisions and understandings may marginalize and disenfranchise the students they teach.

Teachers struggle with significant demands and responsibilities every day that undoubtedly impact their decisions. Results of this investigation indicated that teachers do, in fact, respond to a variety of discourses. Of greater consequence, however, the findings highlighted the significance of the professional contexts within which teachers respond to challenges and make everyday decisions. This research exposed the frustrations that teachers, particularly special education teachers, experience as they negotiate special education policy and examine the taken for granted notions about disability. Meeting resistance at every turn, special education teachers find themselves genuinely caught “between a rock and a hard place.” As a result, special education students are further disenfranchised, and students of color may face particularly negative consequences.

This chapter is divided into the following five sections: (1) Summary of the Study, (2) Professional Contexts, (3) The Ways in which Teachers Make Use of Discourse, (4) Implications for School Personnel, and (5) Recommendations for Future Research.
Summary of the Study

I really believe that John could be successful in general education if we could find a teacher more understanding of his [African American, boisterous and physical] behavior; he’s really a great kid.

I realize that classes are loaded and that one more [needy] special education student may be really tough to handle in that inclusion class, but he is way too smart to be in small group.

I really believe Liz could do well in a World Lit class, but unfortunately she started out in Remedial 9th Lit so she’s stuck on that track.

If Louise doesn’t make it in on-level US History, I will never hear the end of it, and I will really have to fight hard to make it happen for the next kid the next time.

We need to level the classes--one has 12 speds and one has 4. We can’t move Ginny; her parents will have a fit; let’s move Colton.

Teachers encounter these fairly typical scenarios every day, and these are the kinds of situations that led to this investigation. The discourses examined in this investigation evolved as a result of my teaching experience, and were refined through an examination of the literature. These discourses included a discourse of disability, a traditional special education discourse, a discourse of liberalism, and a discourse of teacher professionalism.

The unit of analysis in this case study investigation was the discourses that teachers draw upon in inclusion classrooms. Three high schools and three middle schools outside a southeastern urban center participated in this investigation during the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years. I was able to successfully secure 12 teachers from six schools, two teachers from
each high school and two teachers from each middle school. Ultimately, 11 inclusion teachers were interviewed in this investigation. Teachers were interviewed individually and asked general questions about their classrooms, the courses they teach, their teaching style, their challenges and frustrations, and their experience. Throughout the 2009-2010 school year, and during follow-up interviews in 2010-2011, researcher familiarity improved and participants provided in-depth information about their students and the ways in which discourses impact their practice.

The central question explored in this investigation was: “What discourses do inclusion teachers draw upon to understand and make decisions about the students they teach?”

Additional sub-questions included the following:

1. In what ways do teachers describe the students they teach and what characteristics inform these portraits?

2. In what ways does teacher education, experience and identity influence teacher understandings?

3. How do teachers make sense of special education policy, practice, and guidelines?

4. How do school policies, practices, and climate influence everyday practice and the particular needs of students?

5. What do teachers perceive as the implications of these classroom decisions on the educational futures of their students?

The following eight themes emerged from the data in response to the research questions:

*Theme 1: Disability as Deficit: Teachers respond to disabled students from a medical perspective.*

*Theme 2: Leveling the Playing Field: Teachers believe that special education can and should compensate for individual deficit.*
Theme 3: System Constraints: Teachers suggest that special education decisions are often made in response to district realities instead of student needs.

Theme 4: Despite Good Intentions: Teachers recognize that special education may come at a cost.

Theme 5: Recipes for Success: Teachers believe that students can be successful if they have supportive parents, are motivated and hard working, and advocate for themselves.

Theme 6: The Elephant in the Classroom: Teachers were hesitant to speak about race and careful to protect the identities of their students.

Theme 7: Teachers are Committed to Students and Their Learning: Student/teacher relationships are limited by bureaucracy and enhanced through teacher autonomy.

Theme 8: Lots of Responsibility, Very Little Respect: Teachers expressed frustration about public and professional regard.

Professional Contexts

Although the results indicated that dominant discourses do impact teachers, what appeared more significant upon analysis were the conflicts experienced by classroom teachers when making decisions about the students they teach. Two significant, unexpected findings emerged from the results. First, an analysis of the results underscored the importance of the professional contexts in which teachers work and make decisions about their students. According to Hoy and DiPaola (2010),

Teaching choices are not made in a vacuum. Not only is the teacher situated in an organizational context that influences teaching choices, the teacher also faces the realities of instructing a large group of students. Both factors define, facilitate, and constrain teaching choices. (p. 13)
In addition to negotiating a variety of mainstream discourses, teachers must also negotiate the tensions that exist within classroom, department, school, state, and national contexts. Research findings highlighted the importance of professional contexts, and the ways in which these contexts confine teacher understandings and limit their decision-making alternatives.

The second finding suggests that teachers, particularly special education teachers, face considerable challenges attempting to negotiate the seemingly contradictory discourses that exist within professional contexts. The diagram below (Figure 7) is provided to represent the analysis of the research findings. The Venn Diagram at the center represents the relationship between the four dominant discourses that were explored at the outset of the investigation. Themes (in red) that emerged in response to the research questions as they relate to these discourses are situated within the Venn Diagram. The four themes at the corner of the diagram highlight the particular challenges teachers face within professional contexts. The challenges that teachers face (identified at the four corners of the diagram above) while negotiating discourses within professional contexts will be examined next.
The Ways in which Teachers Make Use of Discourse

Gee (1990) and his understandings about discourse, or the “identity kits” that govern the social interactions of individuals and groups framed the analysis of this investigation. Gee defined discourse as follows:

A socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network', or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful “role.” (p. 143)

In addition, Gee (1989) identified five significant points about discourse that include the following:
These five features of discourse facilitated the interpretation of the results in this investigation. In addition, Reid and Valle (2004) suggested that teachers are not passive recipients of discourse, but actively make use of dominant discourse. An analysis of the findings in this investigation points to the ways in which teachers responded to discourse in order to maintain their positions within dominant discourses.

**Teachers “Substitute” Dominant Discourses in Place of More Critical Alternatives**

Gee (1996) defined dominant discourses (with a capital “D”) as those discourses that are directly linked to power within a particular culture, and those with the fewest conflicts within those discourses are considered the dominant groups. In this investigation, teachers operated within a variety of dominant discourses and relied on these dominant discourses in place of more critical discourses. Teachers employed dominant “identity kits” when situations were troubling, conservations became uncomfortable, or when reality conflicted with the dominant discourses they espouse. Gee (1989) pointed out that discourses are “intimately related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structure in society” (p. 19). Positioned within mainstream culture, teachers seem to feel comfortable surrounded by the security of dominant discourse.

Gee (1989) maintained that “Any discourse concerns itself with certain objects and puts forward certain concepts, viewpoints sand values at the expense of others” (p. 19). When
contradictions emerged, teachers automatically turned to dominant discourse to bridge the gap between reality and ideology. Alternative conceptions that create discomfort were rarely contemplated. Teachers trusted in dominant discourses to maintain their positions within the dominant discourse of schooling. The decision to remain silent about more critical discourses further reinforced their position within dominant discourse.

*A discourse of liberalism.* Teachers in this investigation seemed very comfortable operating within a discourse of liberalism. Teachers relied on a discourse of liberalism to account almost entirely for student achievement. Teachers focused on individual responsibility alone with little acknowledgement of social, cultural, or political influences. Gee (1988) considers ideology an expression of “how people structure their language to express themes, values and a particular world view” (p. 31). Teachers espoused a liberal world view and were careful to speak about student achievement in terms of motivation, work ethic, and student advocacy.

Teacher responses regarding the characterizations of students indicated primarily deficit understandings. Deficits were defined by teachers in terms of academics; teachers spoke about students with weak math skills and how difficult it is for students who are “so low” to keep pace with their classmates. Assumptions about deficit led teachers to adopt a traditional special education discourse without question. However, teachers did not place primary emphasis on deficit and medicalized assumptions. As one teacher remarked, “My best students are special education students.” When teachers were asked to describe successful and unsuccessful students, they placed significantly more weight on individual motivation and work ethic; the consequence of “disability as deficit” was completely overshadowed by a liberal discourse. In this investigation, a discourse of liberalism characterized by motivation, hard work, and
self-advocacy trumped disability every time. Teachers consistently maintained that the reason special education students were not successful was not because of their disability, but because they lacked motivation and work ethic.

The primacy of a discourse of liberalism may be good news for hardworking disabled students who come from supportive families, believe in themselves, and are determined to be successful. Unfortunately, not all students are quite so lucky. Some students have little or no parent support, through no fault of their own. Other students lack the self-advocacy skills to make up for this lack of parent involvement, and as a result are marginalized with school settings. In addition, significant numbers of students appear unmotivated and disinterested, not because they do not care, but as a result of years of failure and frustration. A liberal discourse fails to account for these structural realities, and, just like a traditional special education discourse, the focus remains on the individual in isolation. Both of these dominant discourses fail to address the broader, political structures at work, and as a result the system remains untouched and the status quo is preserved. From a liberal perspective, students with significant cultural capital will continue to prosper while those without are left behind.

_A discourse of colorblindness_. Silence around race in schools is well-documented (Boler, 2004; Castagno, 2008; Pollock, 2004; Schultz et al., 2006), and this silence operates to perpetuate a discourse of color blindness (Castagno, 2008). Evidence indicates that Whites give little consideration to their own racialness (Lewis, 2001), and as a result, whiteness remains situated as the norm (Wells & Holme, 2004). Critical Race Theory is critical of liberalism because of liberalism’s failure to, “take into consideration the persistence and permanence of racism and the construction of people of color as Other” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 29). In this
investigation, teachers avoided conversations about race by relying on a discourse of liberalism supported by color blindness.

Teachers avoid conversations about race for fear of being misunderstood, and to avoid charges of racism or “playing the race card” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Castagno (2008) suggested that teachers use coded language to disguise racial meaning. Teachers in this investigation used a discourse of liberalism and colorblindness to mask any discussions about race and racial identity. Even when asked pointedly about race, all but one teacher avoided the topic entirely by diverting attention to other more dominant discourses. Teachers seemed content to believe that school discrimination ended and equity was assured after the Brown v. Board of Education ruling in 1954. I suggest that because of the ways in which teachers in this investigation constructed difference as deficit, they were afraid that any recognition of difference, racial or otherwise, might suggest that they were indeed racists. To maintain their positions within the dominant discourse of schooling, teachers avoided any examination of power and positioning and appeared comfortable espousing a discourse of liberalism and colorblindness.

Teachers Exploit Special Education Policy to Meet Student Needs

Special education teachers operated within a discourse of traditional special education that governed their understandings in response to special education students. However, teachers challenged special education and circumvented policy when they perceived that student needs were not being met. When teachers believed that students were not being successful in a particular setting, they “worked the system” to change the placement. If IEP driven accommodations were not sufficient, they added additional accommodations. When viable alternatives were not evident, teachers capitalized on policy to meet student needs. Teachers
exploited special education policy to benefit the students they teach. Gee (1989) suggested that “Discourses are resistant to internal criticism and self-scrutiny” (p. 19). Although teachers expressed criticism regarding special education practice, they were careful to maintain that special education policy and ideology “meet a significant need.” Teacher criticisms were confined to the bureaucratic realities of special education that limit student opportunities. Teachers supported the ideology of special education, and the broad themes that emerged from teacher interviews support this assertion. Teachers chose their words carefully and were mindful to criticize only the practical realities of special education instead of the ideological underpinnings.

*Teachers Exploit Special Education Policy to Meet Teacher Needs*

Teachers were clearly uncomfortable confronting disabled identities, particularly in conversations with parents. Teachers relied on special education policy and practice contexts to reveal the disability understandings that teachers were reluctant to address directly. Teachers reported that they hoped parents “figured out” the purpose of eligibility meetings so they did not have to disclose the information themselves. A discussion regarding disability at an eligibility meeting is constructed around deficit understandings linked to student achievement that conflict with a liberal discourse. To avoid this uncomfortable contradiction, teachers attempted to sidestep the conversation altogether and relied on situational, context clues to shed light on the situation.

*Teachers construct a discourse of parent involvement.* Although teachers maintained that parent involvement is critical to student success, they were specific about the types of parent
involvement they value. In this investigation, teachers characterized parent involvement in one of three ways: (1) those who intervened too little, (2) those who intervened too late, or (3) those who intervened ineffectively. Teacher constructions of ‘good parents’ illustrate the preferences teachers have for certain types of intervention. “Good parents” are those who seemed to care but do not interfere, who hold their child accountable and do not enable, and those who get involved at just the right time. Teacher conceptions of parent involvement are one-dimensional and fail to account for structural constraints that limit opportunities for parents to participate. Teacher conceptions also fail to consider students without active parents, who miss out on opportunities that students with more involved parents enjoy. Teachers failed to problematize parent involvement in relation to race, social class, and disability. In addition to liberal underpinnings, teacher constructions of a discourse of parent involvement relied on deficit and disability perspectives to influence teacher understandings about the parents of disabled students. Teachers, who characterized parents in deficit terms, expressed surprise when the parents of small group students, particularly, “stepped up to the plate” and became involved. Teachers use a discourse of parent involvement to secure their positions within a discourse of schooling, rooted in the tenets of liberalism and individual worth.

*Teachers construct a discourse of disability.* The majority of students with low incidence disabilities, such as cerebral palsy or Down’s Syndrome, have been identified well before kindergarten. Early identification occurs in part because low incidence disabilities are more visible and medically defined. However, for students with high incidence disabilities, there is often no indication of a disability. It is not until students fail to meet educational standards that they “become” disabled. In fact, disproportionality only exists within high incidence disability
categories where diagnoses are more subjective and culturally bound (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Students with high incidence disabilities experience a very different discourse than those that are more severely disabled. Understandings of disability are impacted by the severity and type of disability; the degree to which the disabled student “deviates” from the norm.

*A hierarchy of disability.* Teachers in this investigation operated within a hierarchy of disability based on the ideology of “normalcy.” Students closest to the norm were more “liberally” defined. Because students with high incidence disabilities are subjectively defined and less “visible” than students with more severe disabilities, it seemed natural and necessary to interact with these students from a liberal perspective. Teachers bragged, in fact, that students did not know they were even in special education classes. Teachers seemed able to operate comfortably within a liberal and deficit perspective, as long as the disability remained out of sight and relatively normal.

In the same way that teachers experienced discomfort when speaking about disabled identities with parents, they were also uncomfortable in conversations with students. Teachers capitalized on their construction of a hierarchy of disability by promoting a “disability as difference” narrative when interacting with students. When teachers were questioned about why there are two teachers in the classroom or why Mary gets to leave the room for testing, teachers indicated that “everybody has IEPs” or “we all have strengths and weaknesses.” Although teachers in this investigation described their students in deficit ways, teacher actions indicated a discourse of liberalism.
Disabled students as prosthetic devices. Teachers constructed a discourse about disabled students that capitalized on student deficits. The special education teacher from Middle School C spoke about the ways in which general education students can benefit from disabled identities:

It is not always going to be that easy forever. I see that a lot of times . . . it always lets some of your average learners know that it is okay to ask a question, it’s okay not to be good at everything; I’m not the only one in the room that doesn’t get it; I can feel comfortable. There’s gonna be somebody else who doesn’t get it too.

Although disabled students continue to be situated at the bottom of the classroom hierarchy, this example illustrates the way in which special education students are used to reveal educational possibility. Teachers were convinced that disabled students could capitalize on individual deficits and operate as role models for students who had not experienced such setbacks before.

Implications for School Personnel

The aim of this investigation was to examine the discourses that teachers draw upon in order to explore the issue of overrepresentation at the classroom level. It is important to document that I cannot conclude anything with certainty about overrepresentation based on the findings of this investigation. I did conclude that teachers feel very uncomfortable speaking outside their dominant discourse. Teachers avoid discussions about race and disability, and this silence supports the dominant discourses that are linked to overrepresentation. It is unlikely that an answer to the overrepresentation problem will ever be accomplished if conversations about race and disability continue to be veiled in discourses of liberalism. Teachers need spaces to explore their own racialized and abled identities in order to reframe their assumptions in new and more meaningful ways. I make the following recommendations for school personnel:
I suggest that special education teachers frame their notions of professionalism in social and political ways (Sachs, 2003), and challenge special education tradition through a Disability Studies in Education lens.

Teachers operate within professional contexts that limit their autonomy, so I recognize that challenging tradition is easier said than done. Teachers indicated that they do challenge special education when they exploit practice to meet student needs, so I have confidence that teachers can take steps to transform the discourse. A more socially conscious lens that frames disability as difference, not deficit, is required in order to empower students. In addition, teachers must explore their understandings of disability so that conversations with parents and students become more thoughtful, more authentic, and more productive.

Special education teachers would also benefit from this reconceptualization. Conversations indicated that special education teachers are conflicted about their professional identities, and overburdened by increased responsibilities. Special education teachers and students share similar frustrations about their positions within the discourse of schooling that can best be addressed through self-advocacy and self-determination. Teachers do not need rigid, externally defined roles any more than disabled students need interventions based on medicalized assumptions. Teachers need opportunities to explore their professional identities and frame their own vision for the field. A DSE lens could open up possibilities for students and teachers.

I suggest that teachers need to examine their own racialness and problematize their reliance on a colorblind discourse.

Not surprisingly, all teachers espoused a colorblind perspective in this investigation. I recommend that teachers need to move beyond rudimentary understandings of colorblindness and liberalism, and examine the effects of their colorblind assumptions. According to Lewis
(2002), teachers need to “think about the interests served by color-blind discourse, rather than seeing it merely as a deficiency in how educators understand what is taking place in their school” (p. 28). A colorblind discourse situates whiteness as the norm (Wells & Holme, 2004) and reinforces deficit assumptions based on the ideology of normalcy. Teachers need to explore the impact of a colorblind discourse on Black and White students, and examine the ways in which colorblindness privileges Whites within the context of schooling.

- I suggest that teachers carefully consider the use of accommodations to “level the playing field.”

Teachers in this investigation believed unanimously that the mission and responsibility of special education is to “level the playing field” through accommodations and modifications. Notions of accommodations and modifications are based on deficit assumptions directed toward individual deficit. Teachers reported that they provide accommodations for general education students as well as special education students. Two implications should be considered regarding this decision. First, when accommodations are provided to students who are not eligible for special education services, the playing field is not level; general education students have the upper hand. As a result, these general education students receive an advantage not an accommodation. A second, more significant implication concerns labeling effects. To qualify for special education services and accommodations, students have been identified, labeled, and placed in special education settings; benefitting from special education has come at a cost. When general education students are granted accommodations, they benefit from special education without experiencing the stigma of a special education label.
Recommendations for Future Research

This investigation offered a glimpse into the ways in which teachers negotiate discourse within inclusion settings, but much more remains to be investigated. The limitations of this investigation provide suggestions for future research: the addition of classroom observations in inclusion settings to provide a more accurate picture of the ways in which teachers negotiate discourse and operate within professional contexts, more diverse research participants to provide a broader perspective, and more focused attention to issues of race and disability. In addition, a greater understanding of the ways in which professional contexts impact the work of classroom teachers is needed.

Research that examines special education teachers is another area of inquiry that requires further attention. Potential questions to be answered include the following:

- In what ways does the marginalization of special education teachers affect special education students?

- How does lack of special education teacher autonomy and empowerment impact overrepresentation?

- In what ways could teachers, operating within a DSE perspective, change special education policy and practice and increase opportunities for disabled students?

In addition, questions remain about the ways in which the current economic climate continues to impact practice and policy in public schools. Areas to be considered include the following:

- How have budgetary constraints impacted the professional understandings of special education and general education teachers?

- In what ways have special education services changed in response to budgetary constraints?
The results of this investigation underscored the significance of the professional contexts in which teachers work and the tensions they experience while negotiating dominant discourses. Results also suggest that special education teachers face considerable challenges attempting to negotiate seemingly contradictory discourses. Although these findings deserve attention, countless questions remain.
REFERENCES


Allington, R. L. (1994). The schools we have. The schools we need. The Reading Teacher, 48(1), 4-29.


APPENDIX

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT
Dear Teacher:

You are being asked to be in a research study. The study is called “The Discourses Surrounding Teacher Decision Making in Inclusion Classrooms.” The study is being done by Ginger K. Bechtold to fulfill dissertation requirements. She is a doctoral student at The University of Alabama in the College of Education, and a special education teacher at Pope High School in Marietta, Georgia. Mrs. Bechtold is being supervised by Dr. Nirmala Erevelles, Associate Professor of Social Foundations of Education and Instructional Leadership, Department of Educational Leadership, Policy and Technology Studies, at The University of Alabama.

What is this study about?

This study is about the discourses that influence the decisions that general and special education inclusion teachers make about the students they teach. Multiple, sometimes competing, discourses are at work in public schools and may include the special education (medical model) discourse, the social/cultural/political (Disability Studies in Education) discourse, the professional educator discourse, and the Democratic (collaborative, communities of practice) discourse. Teacher instructional and disciplinary decisions within the inclusion classroom will be explored. Special attention will be paid to the impact of these decisions on overrepresentation in special education.

Why is this study important? What good will the results do?

This study will listen to the voices of classroom teachers, an often ignored perspective. Information gained from this investigation may encourage classroom teachers to capitalize on discourses that empower students within inclusion classrooms. Doing so may result in lower disproportionality rates.

Why have I been asked to take part in this study?

You have been asked to be in this study because you are a co-teacher in a suburban high school or middle school, teaching primarily freshman and sophomore students.

How many other people will be in this study?

Five teacher teams at local high schools and middle schools will be chosen to participate in this study. Each team will include a general education and a special education teacher, teaching together in an inclusion setting.
What will we be asked to do in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, you will take part in individual interviews with questions about the classroom decisions you make every day about the students you teach, and the discourses you draw upon when making these decisions. Teacher decisions regarding discipline and instruction within the inclusion classroom will be explored.

How much time will I spend being this study?

You will spend about three hours in personal interviews over a six month period. Interviews will be conducted outside of your regular school day and at your convenience. Research should be completed within one to two semesters.

What will this study cost us?

The main cost to you is the time you will spend in the interviews.

Will I be paid for being in this study?

No, you will not be paid for being in this study.

What are the risks (problems or dangers) from being in this study?

There are no known risks or discomforts involved. Your anonymity is assured and pseudonyms will be assigned to all participants. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your employment or your annual evaluations.

What are the benefits of being in this study?

We cannot and do not guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefits from this study.

What are the alternatives to being in this study?

The alternative to participation is not to participate.

What are my rights as a participant?

If you have read this form and have decided to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. The records of this study will be kept confidential and data will be located in locked files. Audio tapes will be destroyed after data analysis. Your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from this study.
I understand that The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board (a committee that looks out for the ethical treatment of people in research studies) will review study records from time to time. This is to be sure that participants in research studies are being treated fairly and that the study is being carried out as planned.

**Who do I call if I have questions or problems?**

If you have questions about this study right now, please ask. If you have questions about this study later on, please call the investigator, Ginger K. Bechtold, at 678-472-0060. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact – anonymously, if you wish – Ms. Tanta Myles, The University of Alabama Research Compliance Officer, at (205)-348-8461 or toll free at 1(877)-820-3066.

Name____________________________

Signature_______________________

Date____________________________

Ginger Bechtold
APPENDIX B

IRB APPROVAL
April 28, 2009

Ginger Bechtold
Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education
Box 570 302.

Re: IRB#: 09-OR-137, The Discourses Surrounding Teacher Decision Making in Inclusion Classrooms

Dear Ms. Bechtold

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies

Your application will expire on April 28, 2010. You will receive a notice of the expiration date 90 days in advance. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of Continuing Review and Closeout Form. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of the Continuing Review and Closeout Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved consent and assent forms to obtain consent from your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Office of Research Compliance Officer
The University of Alabama
IRB #719

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA
Individual's Consent to be In a Research Study

You are being asked to be in a research study. The study is called "The Discourses Surrounding Teacher Decision Making in Inclusion Classrooms". The study is being done by Ginger K. Bechtold to fulfill dissertation requirements. She is a doctoral student at The University of Alabama in the College of Education, and a special education teacher at Pope High School in Marietta, Georgia. Mrs. Bechtold is being supervised by Dr. Nirmala Erevelles, Associate Professor of Social Foundations of Education & Instructional Leadership, Department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Technology Studies, at The University of Alabama.

What is this study about?

This study is about the discourses that influence the decisions that general and special education inclusion teachers make about the students they teach. Multiple, sometimes competing, discourses are at work in public schools and may include the special education (medical model) discourse, the social/cultural/political (Disability Studies in Education) discourse, the professional educator discourse, and the Democratic (collaborative, communities of practice) discourse. Teacher instructional and disciplinary decisions within the inclusion classroom will be explored. Special attention will be paid to the impact of these decisions on overrepresentation in special education.

Why is this study important? What good will the results do?

This study will listen to the voices of classroom teachers, an often ignored perspective. Information gained from this investigation may encourage classroom teachers to capitalize on discourses that empower students within inclusion classrooms. Doing so may result in lower disproportionality rates.

Why have I been asked to take part in this study?

You have been asked to be in this study because you are a co-teacher in a suburban high school, teaching primarily freshman and sophomore students.

How many other people will be in this study?
Two teams of co-teachers and the students in their classrooms will participate in this study. Teachers, but not students, will be interviewed before, during and after observations.

What will we be asked to do in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, you will take part in individual interviews with questions about the classroom decisions you make every day about the students you teach, and the discourses you draw upon when making these decisions. Teacher decisions regarding discipline, instruction and placement within the inclusion classroom will be explored.

You will also be observed in your classroom.

How much time will I spend being in this study?

You will spend about twelve hours in personal interviews over a six month period at your convenience. Classroom observations will be conducted during your regular school day. Research should be completed within two semesters.

What will this study cost us?

The main cost to you is the time you will spend in the interview. Interviews will be scheduled at your convenience.

Will I be paid for being in this study?

No, you will not be paid for being in the study.

What are the risks (problems or dangers) from being in this study?

There are no known risks or discomforts involved, and your anonymity is assured. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your employment.

What are the benefits of being in this study?

We cannot and do not guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefits from this study.

What are the alternatives to being in this study?

The alternative to participation is not to participate.
What are my rights as a participant?

If you have read this form and have decided to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. The records of this study will be kept confidential and data will be located in locked files. Audio tapes will be destroyed after data analysis. Your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

I understand that The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board (a committee that looks out for the ethical treatment of people in research studies) will review study records from time to time. This is to be sure that participants in research studies are being treated fairly and that the study is being carried out as planned.

Who do I call if I have questions or problems?

If you have questions about this study right now, please ask. If you have questions about this study later on, please call the investigator, Ginger K. Bechtold, at 678-472-0060. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact - anonymously, if you wish - Ms. Tanta Myles, The University of Alabama Research Compliance Officer, at (205)-348-5152 ? you may call collect.

We have read this consent document. We understand its contents and freely consent to participate in this study under the conditions described. The extra copy of this consent form is for you to keep.

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study:

Please initial: ___Yes ___No

______________________________________
Signature of Research Participant         Date

______________________________________
Investigator                             Date
Protocol Approval Date: _______________________

Protocol Expiration Date: _______________________

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 4/2/10
EXPIRATION DATE: 4/27/2010