Now have we gotten it right?: Exploring the special education referral process

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NOW HAVE WE GOTTEN IT RIGHT? EXPLORING THE SPECIAL EDUCATION REFERRAL PROCESS

A Dissertation

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Approved:

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May, 2008
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NOW HAVE WE GOTTEN IT RIGHT? EXPLORING THE SPECIAL EDUCATION REFERRAL PROCESS

An Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
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Doctor of Education

Approved:

Dr. Deborah Gallagher, Committee Chair

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Janine Sue Wahl
University of Northern Iowa
May, 2008
ABSTRACT

This qualitative inquiry explored the special education referral process as understood and implemented by two first grade teachers in a rural school. Both were interviewed and their classes observed; team meetings about their referrals were attended and recorded. The results of these observations were examined through the beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning by the two teachers.

Each teacher referred two students into the process during this study, but none of the four students was found eligible for special education services during first grade. Through a cross-case analysis of the teachers and these students, distinct differences and commonalities were detected. They had different views on inclusion, different styles of classroom management, and different comfort levels with the new referral process and its goals. Both continued familiar teaching practices, even with students for whom they were ineffective. Both teachers viewed learning as information placed in a student by the teacher, rather than as a constructed understanding. Both teachers measured and ranked students against their classroom peers, instead of the school-wide screening for remedial candidates that was intended.

The special education referral process was modeled after the Response to Intervention (RTI) suggested in the 2004 reauthorization of the Individual Disability Education Act, but school personnel did not understand RTI. Therefore, the school had not implemented RTI. Rather, they took vocabulary from RTI and inserted it into the former process, along with an ill understood effort at more data collection. Thus, referral remained in the hands of the classroom teachers who used it to get help in dealing with
their "problem" students. Under the new system, help was available before the student became eligible for special education. Attempts were made to relate these results to teachers’ prior experiences, preservice training, and the structure of the school.
CHAPTER 1
THE PAST INFORMS THE FUTURE

There are many things I am proud to say I have done in the past twenty-five years of my educational career, but I was also an active participant for nine of those years in a process which still haunts me today. When I became principal of an elementary school building, I was confident I was prepared to support the students’ learning by being an instructional leader. I was prepared to teach any grade or manage any classroom, understood the reading and writing process, and realized professional development for the teachers was vitally important to their students’ success. What I never even considered was the special education program. I didn’t have any training in this area, so I left the majority of the special education program to others who seemed to have an interest in it—the special education teachers and the special education consultant from our area education agency. Little did I realize that my lack of interest and my lack of knowledge played a major role in the high stakes decisions for students referred for special education services. The negative consequences of my lack of involvement are what haunt me today.

Who were special education students anyway? Though I am now ashamed to admit it, I thought they were incidental students who were placed in special education because they had a physiological reason why they couldn’t learn like everyone else. I admit I didn’t expect much out of them socially or academically. If they didn’t bother me or other students, I thought they were having a successful school experience. Of course, the freedom to think this way was largely unchallenged in the 1990’s, before the passage
of “No Child Left Behind” (P.L.107-110; 115 Stat.1425; 2002) and its implications. Although there were heated discussions and debates in the special education academic journals about inclusion, I was fairly unaware of the issue because I did not read these journals.

The process for getting students into special education varied little over the nine years I was principal. Basically, if any teacher had concerns about a student, that teacher filled out a single page form indicating any appropriate data on the student and his or her various attempts at trying to remedy the student’s problem. A group of professionals within the school setting then gathered together at the request of the school counselor, reviewed the data sheet, listened to the teacher describe the deficits of the student, and decided there was not enough information to place the student in special education. Subsequently, further testing was requested by the psychologist. Once the testing was completed, the group gathered again to hear the results. For a majority of the students, there was enough discrepancy between IQ score and classroom performance to suggest the child had a learning disability which then entitled that student to special education.

The special education laws called this decision-making group of people a “team.” For these teams to function, everyone should have been working together, which sometimes did not happen. We wanted to get some extra help as quickly as possible for a child who was not succeeding in the classroom; the staff believed that child’s problems resulted from a learning disability which we assumed was neurological—therefore a physiological problem that neither the child nor the family could fix. Some parents, however resisted special education placement. They were disturbed and sometimes angry
at the suggestion their child might have a learning disability and needed special education, and they wanted no help from that program.

Eventually, I came to notice some teachers rarely referred students for special education while others referred many. Were some teachers so unfortunate as to have learning disabled students in their classrooms year after year while others did not? When class lists were created at the beginning of the year, I couldn’t tell who had a learning disability and who did not. How could I be placing all the learning disabled students in the same teachers’ rooms year after year? This did not make sense to me.

I began to notice that once students were in special education, they rarely exited the program during elementary school. It started to bother me when three or four adults would gather to discuss a six or seven year old student whom they have known for a mere matter of months. Usually, after an hour’s discussion, a decision was made which could easily affect a student for the rest of his or her school career. I began to feel more and more uncomfortable with these God-like decisions we were making over a student’s life. How could we really know in one or two meetings if a student needed special education? Was special education truly the help the child needed? I began to question what we were doing to this student or not doing for this student. These patterns of behavior on my part and the staff’s were disturbing, and I didn’t know where to turn.

It was at that point I decided I wanted to move beyond the elementary principal’s position and pursue my lifetime goal of earning a doctorate. Resigning my position and deciding to go to school full time was a big enough decision, but deciding to get my doctorate in special education was probably just as significant. I had always thought a
doctorate in educational leadership would be in my future, but after visiting with a faculty member at the University of Northern Iowa, I decided if I were to stay in education, the best way for me to help teachers and students was to study the field of special education. I firmly believed I was not the only elementary principal who was intimately involved in the decision-making process regarding special education. Surely, many did not have any more experience with special education than I did, and surely, many principals made critical decisions about it on as little understanding as I had.

Somewhat surprising to me, my eyes, heart, and mind opened immediately once I started taking classes! Discussions about the concept of disability as a social construct (Skr tic, 1991; Smith, 1997) were at first meaningless to me. Given the assumption I made that all disabilities were physical irregularities, the thought that our society had initially created and defined failures of the white middle-class students as “learning disabled” never occurred to me. Sleeter’s (1986) research on the origin of the learning disabled category revealed a connection to the United States’ interpretation of the Soviet Union’s launching of Sputnik as a failure of our schools to produce enough scientists and technicians to remain a frontrunner in the space and defense race. This criticism translated to an escalation of reading standards. By reforming American education through tougher standards of measure, many students fell behind. Instead of blaming the difficult standards now expected of all students, the students failing to meet the higher standards themselves were blamed. When middle-class white students started to fail academically their parents and educators, unwilling to blame the children or their environment, created a new category of disability. Those students, whose IQ scores
tended to be fifteen points higher than children of color (Sleeter, 1986), could be seen as intellectually normal and remain in the higher academic track. Understanding the origin of learning disability, through the explanations given by Sleeter (1986), stretched my mind even further as I realized how completely such a socially constructed concept was embedded in the political and economic world.

In another discussion, I was asked to open my eyes and take a look at the color of those in special education across the country. Again, my assumption that disability was physiologically explained never caused me to question the overrepresentation of minorities in special education. Coming from the background of an almost totally Caucasian environment, I was unaware of this possibility, even though the professional literature had recognized this problem for more than twenty years (Bateman, 1994; Dunn, 1968; Green, 2005; Patton, 1998). Somewhat simple explanations as to the causes of overrepresentation of minorities, such as failure of the general education system or inequities in the referral process, left me wondering why the problem still persists today. In this country there is, moreover, a National Research Council Panel on Minority representation that has developed two reports since 1980 regarding this long standing issue (Batsche et al., 2005). It wasn’t until James Patton (1998) suggested that the knowledge producers’ cultural filters regarding students’ behavior were contributing to this overrepresentation that I began to understand the issue with greater clarity. Until the knowledge producers are enlightened culturally, the overrepresentation of minorities in education will most likely continue to increase.
I knew there were placement disparities within my own school system, but I was unaware of the placement patterns for students in special education among the states. Students with specific learning disabilities were placed in regular classes at rates ranging from 2.37 percent in California to 93.59 percent in Vermont. Students with speech or language impairments were placed in the regular classrooms at rates from 4.25 percent in West Virginia to 99.87 percent in Indiana. In our own state of Iowa, 0.30 percent of students with mental retardation were placed in regular classes as compared to 65.95 percent in Vermont (Fifteenth Annual Report, 1993). I was shocked to learn there were such variations in placement throughout the country when there was a federal law defining the categories and requiring the least restrictive environment for all students.

I remember in the 1994 interview for my principal position, teachers asked me about inclusion. It was one of the few questions I really couldn’t answer. They wanted to know my experience with "it." This was of great concern to them because they felt they were supposed to do "it," but didn’t have enough inservice training to know how. As a general education teacher hoping to become an administrator, I really didn’t know how the teachers were to teach special education students in the classroom when they were busy enough with general education students! I was empathizing with the general education teachers' concerns far more than I should have been. Now, after my education at the University of Northern Iowa, I know inclusion is not something you do to students. It is a belief system about how individuals and professionals view and treat difference, either as an abnormality or as an aspect of the human condition (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996).
Another issue I intuitively felt as an administrator regarding students who were placed in special education was validated through my course readings. The lack of academic progress for students in special education was not just something I noticed in my school, but was brought to special and general educators’ attention years ago through an article published by Lloyd Dunn in 1968, seven years before the passing of the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142). In this seminal article, he expressed a concern about the placement of students in special education because “overwhelming evidence [indicates] that our past and present practices have their major justification in removing pressures on regular education teachers and pupils, at the expense of the socioculturally deprived slow learning pupils themselves” (Dunn, 1968, p.293). The efficacy studies of the time suggested special education students would make as much or more progress in the regular grades as they do in special education, and evidence was mounting that removing a student with a handicap from the regular classroom probably contributed significantly to his or her feelings of inferiority and problems of acceptance (Dunn, 1968). Special education was a form of tracking students which should be abolished for the same reasons racially-segregated tracking was outlawed.

It wasn’t enough to be nice to the students in special education to make them feel accepted in the school. The negative, stigmatizing effects of being labeled as a special education student ran much deeper than a friendly hello or a hug in the hallway could overcome. When a teacher or other students associate a label with a student, even with one as recent as ADD, it can stigmatize the student (Armstrong, 1996). Kliewer &
Biklen (1996) found the connotations teachers and students attached to a disability label sometimes restricted the depth and breath of their verbal interactions, which left assumptions about the student unchallenged. Why was it necessary to categorize students and bestow upon them a label which could affect them for the rest of their lives?

My current employment as an administrator for an area education agency requires me to oversee special education practices in five different school districts. I have the responsibility to attend many Individualized Education Plan meetings, more commonly referred to as IEP meetings, and have conversations with educational leaders about “problem” children. The need to bring into consciousness the assumptions and beliefs educators bring to the special education identification process is enormous. Many have a smattering of technical knowledge about special education and the law, but it appears to me little thought is given by many as to the short and long term effects of such a placement. Administrators are making decisions that perpetuate the problems which have plagued the field for years. I don’t believe most principals have considered any of the concerns above: disability as a socially constructed category of difference, overrepresentation of gender or race in special education placements, the variability in identification and labeling from state to state, the often low expectations for academic achievement in special education classrooms, or the possibilities of inclusion as a way of eliminating the negative stigma and consequences of placement.

Changes of process in the path leading to special education placement have occurred within our area education agency in the past two years, yet the underlying assumptions have gone unchallenged. The system of refer, test, and place a student,
which has been debated for several years (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan & Young, 2003), has finally been replaced with a different system. Rather than a test and place model, school districts in my area are required to consider the students’ response to interventions through a process called Instructional Decision Making (Iowa Dept. of Education, 2006). Instructional Decision Making (IDM), is a systematic process of screening students who are not achieving expected, prescribed standards. Once students are identified as low achievers, appropriate interventions are designed and implemented in hopes of raising their achievement. One would think this change in model might also change the conversations about special education, but so far it hasn’t. The school districts are viewing this change as a hardship imposed on them by the area education agency’s interpretation of the reauthorization of Individual Disability Education Act of 2004 (20 U.S.C. §1414). Typically educators are seeing it as nothing more than an increased bureaucratic burden that produces no corresponding increase in efficacy.

With this new model, there is more accountability for the general education teachers’ efforts in instruction. They are required to work with students in small groups or conduct one-on-one instruction before considering eligibility for special education. They are required to do some formal progress monitoring to provide the “hard evidence” that the student is or is not responding to the intervention designed to address the learning problem which was determined at the outset. Some teachers, particularly at the middle school and high school levels, are simply refusing to comply. By not recognizing learning problems in a team meeting, the teachers are not required to consider, much less implement, small group instruction for students whose learning needs are not being met.
Some teachers have informally commented they do not wish to spend their evenings graphing data points to determine the students' response to instruction. Because of this reluctance on the teachers' part, I question how the learning needs of some students are being met.

At the elementary level, the story is a bit different. More identification of special education students has always occurred at the elementary level. The elementary teachers have already incorporated small group instruction into their daily routine. What they haven't been doing is a thorough job of progress monitoring. The elementary educators are currently complaining about the new process because of the added burden of the required paperwork, but they are complying. Students are still being identified for special education although at a much slower pace. It is too soon to tell if the numbers of students identified will continue to decrease at the elementary level, but the first year of full implementation indicated there may be a trend in that direction. The possible reduction in numbers of students in special education will likely be a result of the new process for eligibility and not any philosophical shift in thinking about special education.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this dissertation research was to explore the referral process, past and present, as it related to the lives of experienced first grade teachers in a rural school district in Iowa. I began this study with a deep interest in understanding how they were managing their students' reading and math achievement. Knowing more about the pressures, internal and external, which they felt compelled to address, I endeavored to further my understanding of the decisions they made on behalf of their students. I was
curious as to how the new Instructional Decision Making model affected their work and what effect it had on their lives and the lives of their students. I hoped to gain further understanding as to why some of their students were referred into the special education process.

I began my research by becoming familiar with the teachers, their students, and the school in which they work. I followed the Instructional Decision Making process from each teacher's perspective. The aim of this study was to consider the influences on the decisions made during the referral process. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How and why were certain students chosen for the referral process?
2. How were decisions about the student made once the process began?
3. What decisions were made about the students? And what reasons/rationales were provided to support these decisions?
4. What were the attitudes and beliefs of school personnel that influenced the process?

Self as a Researcher

As I began this inquiry, I was empowered by my growing awareness of self. Besides the obvious naivety which I felt as a beginning researcher, I was also bringing to the inquiry process all that I knew of myself and all that I have yet to uncover about who I am and how that influences the construction of knowledge. My experiences of the past, through my childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, and now middle-age all contributed to my view of the world. This view of the world shaped and continues to
shape my understanding of the intentions and motivations behind the interpretations I constructed throughout the inquiry process (Smith, 1993).

Constructing Myself through Other Construction

From my “Mayberry” beginning, I have lived a life of white middle class American values. Growing up in the fifties, I found my mother at home where she cooked, kept the house, and raised my sister and myself. My father owned his animal feed store business which meant many long hours away from home. This began my socialization as a female in America: involved with children, making a home for myself and those in my family, and expecting another (i.e. a spouse) to earn money to support us all. The small, rural town where I spent my childhood was safe enough for me to ride my bike anywhere. During the summer days I checked in with my parents only at mealtimes; otherwise, I was left to play and explore the neighborhood around me. Strangers and terrorists were not words in my vocabulary. I was isolated from poverty, differences of ethnicity, religion, or much diversity of any kind. My days were filled with family, friends, and neighbors who lived within a block or two of my residence.

As my school experience broadened, so did my learning about others. By the time I was ten years old, I began to realize not all kids lived with their biological parents, not all kids had a comfortable home in which to live, and not all kids were able to learn as I could learn. “Bad” boys were punished by the teachers with a paddling in front of the class as they grasped their ankles. Often times, as I remember, the “bad” boys were also the “stupid” kids or ones who couldn’t read or do math problems. These experiences contributed to my determination to do well in school so that I would not be ridiculed by
adults and students alike. School also gave me a sense of superiority over those who didn’t have the same home life. Assuming my life was better, I detached myself from those who were impoverished, financially or emotionally. Awakened by the sense of advantaged difference, I started to live a life of comparisons—a slippery slope leading to much misery for me and unconscious harm for others.

Wanting to construct myself as one who was smarter, richer, cuter, faster, popular, and holding close to me those images, led to avoiding the Other. The fear of others who were different threatened my self-constructed image. This kept me at a physical distance, as well as a psychological, political, and emotional one. To protect my image of my desired self meant keeping distance from the less “desirable” attributes seen in others (Heshusius, 2004).

Fear of others who were different than me was very much a part of my life; yet, I didn’t know what to do with the fear, so I fed it over and over again as I constructed the Other. I remember one girl who was about my age and a niece of my next door neighbor. She was called “retarded” by anyone who wasn’t a family member. I didn’t know where she went to school but she didn’t go with me. I was afraid of her because her language was incomprehensible and she often “got into my personal space.” Lous Heshusius (2004) suggested that “to become intimately and relentlessly familiar with our fears might be the only way to integrate them into our ‘selves’ by seeing that what we fear, we fear because it is part of all our possible selves” (p.284). By feeding my fear of this girl, I was giving it power to control my actions and eliminate the understanding of another human being and, in turn, eliminating a deeper understanding of myself. Even today, I
am not sure I have allowed myself to become intimate with my fears of different Others. This is indicative of what I am consciously or unconsciously trying to exclude as I continue to construct a desirable self (Heshusius, 2004).

Fear lying inside me, yet manifesting itself as scorn, arrogance, aloofness, and indifference, accompanied me into high school. The possible source of that fear could have been rejection. Seeing others rejected for myriad reasons, many of which were simply uncontrollable, I tried to be as “normal” as possible. I found myself, upon reflection, reacting to friends who, given even the slightest difference between my desired self image and them, who ever so slightly pushed the boundaries of the undesirable, were eliminated from my social circle. I still desired to be included among the smartest, the most fashionable, the most popular, and esteemed by adults, but those attributes were not congruent with each other. Being popular meant you couldn’t be the smartest. Being fashionable with peers meant disrespect to adults. My friends were now refusing to be the way I needed them to be so that I could be the self I wanted to be. This created a profound confrontation. As Heshusius (2004) quoted from James Baldwin’s (1988, p.5) writing, “when another thinks he or she knows who I am, it is because he or she needs to be a certain self” (pg. 291). When I began to realize others were not who I wanted them to be, then my certain self was in question.

Upon graduation, I struggled to find my place in the world. With the ever present pressure to create myself through the eyes of what others wanted me to be or what I thought I should be, I found myself wandering down life’s path with no inner sense of self or purpose in life. I wanted to be a teacher, but was told by adults who were already
in the field that I would never get a job in the saturated market. As a result, I didn’t even try to get a teaching certificate even though I thought I could be a good teacher if given the chance. Instead, I worked in various businesses with tasks ranging from delivering farm implement parts to selling children’s clothes. With each employment, I found myself unhappy with who I was and what I was doing with my life. I wanted to be a teacher. A teacher was important to the lives of others and I wanted that position. Eventually, I listened to the one person, my husband, who convinced me I would never be a teacher if I didn’t have the right credentials. With that encouragement, I decided to pursue a teaching degree.

Reproducing the Status Quo

Once the decision to get a teaching degree was made, I entered into my studies with more determination than I had ever given to my high school career. I took all the required classes and was “successfully” socialized into the world of teaching. In fact, my professional preparation program did even more to enforce a certain unthinking conformity. Not one class required self reflection nor suggested I was constructing my own image by distancing myself from Others who threaten my own desirable traits. The need to be separate from that which threatens the desired images for the self becomes reconstructed time and again so that it becomes habitual (Heshusius, 2004). It is not surprising then, that my aloofness and exclusionary fears toward different Others outside of the expected “norm” were neither recognized nor confronted. If I had been given the opportunity to understand this habitual process, instead of repeatedly constructing the separation I so readily accepted, the cycle could have been broken. This process is the
function of hegemony which by its very nature is unconscious. The attention I needed to
give to my understanding of differences should have been deliberately slowed down,
experienced, recognized and only then, new meanings and understandings might have
emerged. As a result of the lack of reflection on my part, and the hegemony of both the
special and general education systems, my acceptance of identifying and segregating
special education students lived on in my mind as the “right” way to educate all students.

The practice of separating identified students to meet their educational needs
through the special education system continued when I became a principal. The system
was already set up to function in that manner and I didn’t even consider questioning it. I
found myself entrenched in the general education system, with its teachers and students,
leaving the special education system on the periphery of my duties. Even considering the
possibility of deeply connecting with those who were so Other was incomprehensible to
me. I instinctively wanted to exclude them from my daily work and my daily contact. I
didn’t know about teaching special education students and I didn’t know how to interact
with them if they were very far outside the “normal” range of behavior. The classes I
took in my Master’s Program socialized me to become more a manager of a school rather
than a leader for educating all students. Schedules, parent problems, statistics, law, and
supervision were topics I remember learning about as I prepared to become a principal.
The only time special education students were mentioned in my Master’s program was in
the educational law class. In that course, we studied case law related to students with
disabilities. The message I received from that course was to make sure, as a principal,
that the school complied with all the legal requirements regarding special education
identification and placement to avoid any potential law suits or other time-consuming legal events such as mediations, hearings, and so on. This also sent an unstated message to me about special education students. I unconsciously felt they could be a possible source of trouble and inconvenience if I didn’t meet the letter of the law. They were "problems" to be managed. This left me with the same message I learned in my undergraduate program about students with special needs: identify, segregate, and leave them to someone else to educate. All I needed to do was to make sure the special education administrative rules were followed.

**My Epiphanies**

Upon considering a doctorate, my thinking was challenged as to where to focus my studies for the intensive area. I was challenged because my initial thoughts were to study in the leadership area as an extension of my experience as a school principal. When I was asked to consider Special Education as my intensive area, my initial reaction was "never." I would never consider Special Education. I always distanced myself from that arena and I didn’t want to start getting any closer at this point in my career. Besides, I didn’t want to tell people my doctorate was in Special Education. Just the words, "special education" seemed to me to be loaded with unfavorable and unflattering connotations. I didn’t think it would matter if special education pertained to a student who was in it, a teacher who taught it, or an educational administrator who studied it; others would continue to distance themselves at any level just as I have done. I still had this need to be accepted by others, thus declaring my intensive area as Special Education was too big a leap for me to make at that time. I also was convinced there would be more
potential employment for me if my doctorate were in Educational Leadership rather than in Special Education.

However, after extensive contemplation, there was no other choice for an intensive area of focus but Special Education. For me to develop professionally through coursework at a deeper level, I decided I would gain the most by studying an area I previously avoided. I have now come to realize my education has expanded into developing myself as a whole person—not just an educator. My decision has not gone unrewarded. Through my experiences in my doctoral program, I have a new perspective on students with special needs as well as a new perspective on my personal life and life in general, an unintended consequence of my professional studies.

The varying pieces of literature and researchers I have studied in my program and the ensuing discussions created for me many new understandings. My first epiphany came through the exploration and consideration of the scientific research process. With the emphasis on scientific research-based strategies promoted as the "gold standard" and almost required in today's context of achievement (National Research Council, 2002), it was almost anarchy to consider any other way of knowing how best to teach students. Yet, through my readings, I discovered the scientific method may not be the best method by which to understand the educational setting (Gallagher, 2004; Iano, 1986; 1987; Poplin, 1987).

My second epiphany came through discussions and readings about disability. I was awakened to the conceptual understanding of disability and disability labeling as being socially constructed (Armstrong, 1996; Dunn, 1968; Kliewer & Biklen, 1996;
Poplin, 1988b; Sleeter, 1986). I now believe that we construct our understanding of the world we live in; it isn’t there waiting to be discovered. Researchers and others have constructed the concept of various differences as disabilities and constructed labels for those differences. Whenever we are able to define other’s disability, we feel a sense of power, however unacknowledged, because we are concurrently defining ourselves as able (Heshusius, 2004). This impulse to compare or, more accurately, to make individual comparisons, is deeply entrenched in our culture. Yet, we know society has created specific disability labels because the definitions are “always in flux, constantly being redefined or modified, and certainly not static, objective, natural or a given” (Kliewer & Biklen, 1996, p. 85).

Because disability labels are our own creation, we know (or should know) it is possible to reconceptualize “difference,” eliminate labeling, and decide it is not necessary or desirable to identify students in such a manner. Breaking down the walls of separating special education and general education could start with eliminating the need to label and thus stereotype differences in children. There are some professionals who believe this has already begun in Iowa. Instead of determining a label to affix to a student who may be entitled to special education, we now are able to say the student is an eligible individual. A specific disability label, such as learning disabled (LD), is not required to be eligible for special education support. However, the eligible individual is now recorded as EI on the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and therefore the students assigned this designation continues to remain a labeled individual.
My third epiphany was an intuition about decision-making. This topic has been researched and given a theoretical framework. I had no knowledge of micropolitical theory as a formalized concept, yet I knew politics were always at work in the school setting. The literature of more recent times has considered the idea that the players in an educational system are making decisions based on desires, needs, values, and other unconscious actions. This behavior has been documented in the literature on micropolitical theory.

Micropolitical theory has been researched in schools and other organizations. Burns (1961) viewed micropolitics as “the exploitation of resources, both physical and human, for the achievement of more control over others….”(p.278). Cyert and March (1963) discovered decision-making often occurred within a framework of disparate goals and that from this process coalitions emerged to achieve political goals. Pettigrew (1973) found decision making processes could not be explained without understanding the political power in the organization. Mangahm (1979) suggested power as the common currency of all negotiation and the basis of all social and organizational behavior.

Micropolitical theory has been explored in the educational setting by Iannaccone (1975) with his study of interactions between administrators, teachers, and students. Micropolitical theory was also furthered by Hoyle (1986) and his idea of micropolitics as a continuum, and Ball’s (1987) seminal study of data gathered in British schools from which he developed a comprehensive political theory of school organization.

Other researchers who have contributed to the knowledge on micropolitics in schools are Hargreaves (1986a) with his study of understanding teachers’ work in the
context of micropolitics, Sparks (1990) who studied curriculum changes and the effect micropolitics had on those changes, and Blasé (2000) who studied teachers and the political strategies they used and developed to interact with their principals.

All these previous research studies suggest there is a correlation between the beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions of the people involved in the decision making and the final decision. By being able to articulate the practice of using power to achieve preferred outcomes as micropolitical activity within a school building, I was able to understand the possibilities of the relationship between people’s experiences, values, and intentions and their subsequent decisions. Of course, without delving deeper into conversations and decisions, it is only speculation; but the micropolitical theory has put me on alert for detecting often tacit motivation behind concrete decisions.

Micropolitics at Flicker Elementary affected my work even as I began. When I asked permission from the principal to conduct this study and approach one or two first grade teachers, she not only gave me immediate permission, but she also suggested two teachers who she thought would be willing. The teachers she offered as participants for my inquiry never said an unkind word to me about their principal. I was fairly certain the principal did not suggest these participants to me because she knew they would speak highly of her. I suspect she thought they would be the most positive participants because they were, in her eyes, very good teachers. From a micropolitical standpoint, she offered teachers she considered good rather than typical in an unconscious attempt to place her school in a positive light.
In addition, I didn’t discover until much later in my study that my two main participants each had a special relationship with the principal. Both of them had taught with her, one as a preservice teacher and the other as a part-time colleague, when she had not yet left the classroom. Thus, I found both participants were very supportive of her and her ideas. If they didn’t like what was happening they were quick to blame the system or the administration as whole, but not their principal. In general, both participants spoke effusively about their principal.

On another level, micropolitics were at work during the team meetings. All the educators at the table were polite and professional, yet one individual in each meeting seemed to drive that meeting. I found it to be the referring classroom teacher who drove each meeting’s purpose and outcome. Only the classroom teachers brought students to the referral process. Once a student was in the process, the other team members brought forth their perspectives, but each teacher managed the meetings to get what she wanted. Only gradually did I come to see the power of classroom teachers to achieve their preferred outcomes in Child Study Team meetings.

My Fears After the Study

I knew I was going into the study bringing my experiences, especially professional ones, into interpreting my participants’ view of the world. But I was also surprised as to how much my personal view of the world played a role in this study.

First, and probably foremost, fear seemed to be my major motivating influence. I was, and still am, most afraid, of the reactions of my participants should they ever read this study. Both participants in my study were willing, yet would they have been so
willing if they knew my interpretations of their meetings, words and actions suggested something about them that would evoke feelings of inadequacy, anger or denial? As Eisner (1998) noted, “qualitative researchers who convey to teacher...a sincere interest in their opinions and ideas are likely to elicit a great deal of information that individuals may not even know they are providing” (p.217). I believe, for whatever reason, my participants shared with me a great deal of what they believed about teaching and learning and their particular situations. I don’t believe they were aware of how the information they shared revealed to me, at least, an incongruence between what they said and what they did. They, just like me, were products of their own experiences, and were reproducing the status quo without realizing it. I fear I will offend them with my interpretations of that information if they read this study. I know this about myself—I do not like it when someone is angry at me and I know this may happen. I pushed myself beyond that fear, however, to write about what I believe I heard and saw, in a sincere attempt to inform readers of what was happening in this particular school, with these particular people so that, if the reader wishes, other questions could be asked and possible interpretations could be made.

My second fear, though lesser, was the fear of “getting it right.” I was fully aware, as a qualitative researcher, there was no “one right way” or no one set of techniques to do a study of this type (Gallagher, 1995), yet my personal need to do things “right” found me sifting the chaos of information for a single key piece that did not exist. I struggled with knowing what was important and what wasn’t important among all that I heard and saw. Because I didn’t know the outcome of the study, I wasn’t sure if what I
heard or saw was going to be included in the final interpretation, so I was continually asking myself, should I pursue this answer in depth? Should I note that student’s behavior? Is that poster on the wall of any importance? Is the setting for conducting the interview the right setting and how is it affecting the answers to my questions? I finally had to let go of the need to do it “right” and record and observe as much as was humanly possible. Moreover, what I noticed was at least in part based on unconscious choices which were predicated on traits and assumptions that have never been examined.

My third fear was most likely related to my need to be liked. I was afraid I was taking too much time from my participant’s personal lives. When I heard their stories and observed their professional lives, I was not surprised to find they had very little time of their own to interact with their families and pursue activities which were not school related. Again, while they were willing participants in this study, I felt I was intruding on their personal lives when I wanted to schedule interviews. One night in April, I recall, I apologized to one of my participants, feeling guilty that I was taking time away from her daughter and husband, who left the house when I came. I had to remind myself that this was the chosen location of my participant, yet I found myself apologizing to her husband, telling him I was almost finished, when he came into the room upon his return.

Eventually, with more practice, my fears stopped dominating my consciousness as I became intrigued and involved in my participants’ lives. It took me until I was about half-way through the study to disregard the tape recorder and talk in a conversational manner with one of my participants, although that comfort never came with the other. That participant relaxed as well, and I felt we were in good rapport most of the time. I
started to listen and respond more deeply with the more interviews I conducted. I moved from a need to “cover” my questions to actually concentrating on the present. When I did that, I felt I responded better to what my participants were saying. I felt it was tough work, feeling my way through the darkness of their minds and mine to bring something to light. Even today I am still concerned about writing words with barbs, but it is my sincere hope the readers will come to know my participants as caring, dedicated educators.
CHAPTER 2
IDENTIFICATION STRUGGLES

From my own experiences, both as teacher and principal, I was concerned with the variability in the number of referrals by different teachers. As a teacher I questioned whether or not I was doing my job if I didn’t refer one or two students a year to special education. As a principal, I questioned the unpredictability in which students were chosen by teachers to be referred to special education. I decided to review the literature and found the identification criteria for determining special education students had been disputed throughout the years. These ideas influenced my thinking as I pondered the efficacy of the process we use today.

Throughout the decades of the twentieth century, society has struggled with who should be considered “handicapped,” especially if the person was not deaf or blind or physically disabled. When decisions were made as to whether a person was “feebleminded” or “mentally retarded,” definitions varied in relation to the resources available to support them. For the purposes of this research, I provide a brief background of the identification process of special needs which have occurred during the last thirty years. By examining the means and events which have shaped the identification process, even with a broad lens over a period of time, it becomes evident that the determination of who needs a special education is still deeply ambiguous.

Use of Intelligence Tests as a Means to Identification

It wasn’t hard to determine who was eligible for special education in the 1800’s. Institutions were built for people who were primarily deaf or blind and their education
(such as it was) was provided while they were there (Smith, 1998). When other institutions were built to house people with “mental deficiencies,” a need arose to create a more definitive classification system. More people were entering the institutional doors than there were resources available for them (Tyor & Bell, 1984). Mental deficiencies were broken down according to perceived “severity,” and those with special needs were categorized as follows: idiots—those who could possibly learn to improve their personal habits given constant training; imbeciles—those who could be self-sufficient and help the less able; feeble-minded—those with the lesser degree of mental disability; and morons—Goodard’s label distinguishing those with a permanent abnormality (Trent, 1994). These categories were arbitrary and mainly a “product of deductive reasoning” (Trent, 1994,p. 26). More to the point, these categories were more judgments than a medical or scientific diagnosis (Tyor & Bell, 1984).

As more and more people were being placed in specialized institutions for the blind, deaf, and mentally disabled, the first public schools, known as common schools were emergent (Bernard & Mondale, 2001). A solution to overcrowding in the specialized institutions was to transfer some of the students to the common schools. As special needs students began entering the public schools, progressive movement advocates questioned whether all students should have the same education. At the turn of the century, a French minister of education asked Alfred Binet to develop a means of identifying those children in public schools who could not meet the demands imposed by the regular classroom and therefore needed special classes. Binet created a test which was originally designed to provide guidance for educational planning; “it was not, in
Binet’s view, a measure of innate potential or fixed capacity” (Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982, p. 29).

Binet’s intent for the test was not the purpose for which it was widely adopted by others. During the Industrial Revolution, when cities and industries were growing, the number of immigrants into the United States swelled. The educational system was not prepared for the arrival of so many children. Their varied cultural and linguistic differences often allowed already existing prejudices to result in the label of “feeblemindedness.” Binet’s development of the intelligence test paralleled the United State’s compulsory attendance law in 1915 (Heller et al., 1982). This enabled the United States to quickly adapt the Binet test as a means to sort and select the vast and diverse number of children who were required to attend school.

The “scientific” development of intelligence testing provided a rationale for the labeling and separation of mentally retarded children. By 1920, psychometric testing was being employed in mass numbers, and it confirmed the prejudice that there were individuals who were incapable of achieving at the expected rate. The tests were not used to diagnose specific learning problems, but were used to isolate from the mainstream of the graded schools those who could not do well. Classifying a person as mentally retarded was much easier after the adoption of the intelligence test which served as a simple method of tagging deficient performance. Intelligence tests met the needs of an educational system that valued efficiency, economy, categorization, prediction, and science.
Difficulties, however, began to appear as increasingly more children scored below established criterion for normal intelligence. These difficulties were due to the inherently social nature of just such an identification (Heller et al., 1982), and lack of resources led to pressure to lower the threshold required to identify a student as mentally retarded. Throughout the twentieth century, this threshold was repeatedly lowered and new categories were created to allow moving students from special education into the general education classroom. For example, a student in the mid-twentieth century who scored between one and two standard deviations below the mean on the intelligence test would have been considered as "borderline" mentally retarded (American Psychiatric Association, 1987). This distinction allowed back into the normal school populations students who were previously kept out.

Concern about testing and the placement of students in special education was supported by the country’s civil rights movement. Special day classes had become the norm at that time, and the existence of a disproportionate number of minority children in these classes opened schools to scrutiny as pockets of segregation within the system (Dunn, 1968). Intelligence tests were increasingly blamed as the mechanism for identification and placement. It was argued that either the IQ tests were biased against poor minority children or the methods of administration of the test were not appropriate, making the IQ tests as an evaluative tool inappropriate for minority students. In 1969, the Association of Black Psychologists called for a moratorium on the use of mental ability tests standardized on white populations as the basis for placing black children in special education (MacMillan & Semmel, 1994).
Case law supported discontinuing the use of standardized intelligence tests for placement in special education. *Diana vs. State Board of Education* (1970/1973) challenged the use of IQ tests for placement of Mexican-American children in educable mentally retarded classes on the ground that they were standardized only on majority group children and thus were culturally biased against minorities. The *Larry P. vs. Riles* (1972/1974/1979) case got national attention for changing the method of identification for special education. Between 1972 when the first complaint was filed and 1979 when the decision was issued, federal and state laws governing special education had changed considerably and the relationship between racial and minority segregation and special education placement had become a subject of increasing debate. The result of the *Larry P. vs. Riles* (1972/1974/1979) case was that California had to remove the controversial IQ tests from the list of approved instruments for evaluation and placement of children in “Educably Mentally Retarded” classes. Litigation caused states to reconsider testing and evaluation procedures and expanded the search for new methods of assessment.

The use of the IQ tests also helped to distinguish learning disabled students from other categories of failing students. Knowing that a student’s IQ was in the “normal” range, yet classroom performance was substandard, suggested to parents and educators the students were really members of the middle or upper tracks in schools (Sleeter, 1986). By being a member of the “right track,” the students would be seen as having a greater potential for achievement in the labor market. Thus, since the inception of the learning disability category, the number of students identified as having this particular disability has continued to increase (Bradley, Danielson,& Hallahan, 2002).
Mandated Team Process of Identification

To counteract the overrepresentation of minority group members and the growing numbers of students with specific learning disabilities in special education, the use of a team process was written into the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975). Multidisciplinary teams which would use multiple criteria and sources for identification were mandated in hopes that the different perspectives of professionals would safeguard against individual bias and error when evaluating the child (Kabler & Genshaft, 1983; Pfeiffer, 1981; Pfeiffer, 1982), thereby decreasing the disproportionate number of minority students as well as the overall number of identified students.

The multidisciplinary team stems from the assumption that a group of varying professionals could collectively make better decisions than an individual (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1989). However, the benefits of the team approach in making decisions about identification have been questioned since its inception. School districts across the nation implemented the team process in a variety of ways. Decisions were made by each individual school district regarding the allocation of special education personnel, the specialists involved with their district, and time for team meetings (Moore, Fifield, Spira, & Scarlato, 1989).

In addition to inconsistent implementation, other problems surfaced. For many teams role ambiguity and confusion existed: Who was responsible for what tasks? This most likely resulted from their lack of skill development and team processing (Abelson & Woodman, 1983). Teachers were often required to make time for team meetings either after school, resulting in decreased work time, or during the day, reducing their
instructional time with students. Administrators and psychologists tended to dominate the meetings as their information and opinions seemed to carry more weight than the parents’ or teachers’ opinions.

In a 1981 study, Ysseldyke, Algozzine, and Allen found that teachers were either not participating in team meetings or were doing so in a very superficial manner. If they were participating, some very important types of information were not being discussed, such as teacher-administered tests or teacher recommendations for placement. Certainly, the mandated team process, which has been in effect for more than thirty years, has not produced a reduction in the number of identified students or the overrepresentation of minorities in special education (Bradley et al., 2002; Green, 2005).

**Current Struggles**

So now we find ourselves in the present, struggling with the same issues. Congress, through the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, has reconceptualized “disability.” This is a move from using the IQ tests with a discrepancy model to “educational disabilities” that are seen in children who do not benefit from “evidenced based” practices. Incorporated into this reauthorization is a model called Response to Intervention or RTI, which has been broadly described as a process in which students are provided quality instruction and their progress monitored. If progress has not been satisfactory, then additional instruction is provided and specific data is collected on the efficacy of the instructional interventions. Finally, if there is enough evidence of lack of progress, the student may be ultimately considered for special
education (Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2005). IDEA (2004) did not set a timetable for schools to implement RTI but suggested that changes be made as soon as possible.

In my current assignment, the RTI process and eligibility for special education has been combined with a process of school improvement called Instructional Decision Making (IDM; Batsche et al., 2005). This IDM model uses data regarding students’ responses to instruction to determine future educational needs and services. Within this system, three cycles of instruction are identified and implemented before eligibility for special education is considered.

Core instruction, which is the first of these three cycles, is the combination of instructional practices, materials, and strategies that make up the instruction provided in the general classroom for the majority of the students. The second cycle is supplemental instruction which is differentiated to meet the needs of students who are having marked difficulties and/or those who have a need for more than the core instruction. This specialized instruction is most often provided in a small group somewhere in the classroom or school building. The third cycle is intensive instruction which is significantly differentiated to meet the intensive needs of the student. Most often this is provided to students on an individual basis.

The supplemental and intensive cycles of instruction are considered general education interventions; therefore general education teachers would be expected to implement them. General education interventions have been required prior to consideration for special education since the implementation of the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) in 1977. These were commonly discussed
in pre-referral team meetings as a way to reduce the number of inappropriate formal referrals. Problems with the pre-referral process have occurred in the past. Issues such as bias among teachers (Knotek, 2003), pre-referrals based on extreme social-behavior problems and home situations (Mamlin & Harris, 1998), and teachers' lack of tolerance for heterogeneous classrooms and individual differences (Ysseldyke et al., 1983) all contributed to inconsistent pre-referrals for special education. Whether or not the new, more formalized general educational intervention cycles will eliminate the past pre-referral problems has yet to be determined.

With the currently proposed identification process, the general education interventions are the foundation for gathering the evidence necessary for a team of professionals to evaluate and determine whether a student is eligible for special education. Iowa's eligibility for special education has three major elements to address when making an eligibility decision: progress, discrepancy, and need (Grimes et al., 2006, p.6). The individual's rate of progress is compared to the expected rate of progress of his or her grade level peers. Discrepancy is "the difference between the individual's level of performance compared to peers' level of performance or other expected standards at a single point in time" (Grimes et al., 2006, p. 10). Need refers to "the conclusion that the educational interventions required by the individual to be successful cannot be sustained without special education services" (Grimes et al., 2006, p.12). There are a total of fourteen questions within these three areas that guide the team in making an eligibility decision.
The evolution of identifying students who have a disability has been continual and elusive. The lines have been drawn and redrawn to include and exclude students from receiving special education services. No doubt these fluctuations in requirements, procedures, and criteria have been influenced by social attitudes toward disability and labeling, the need to allocate limited resources to the right students, legislative and judicial action, and social pressures. Today we embark on yet another round of thinking about referrals and identification.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Research Design

My interest in conducting this study centered on learning about how and why first grade students may or may not be chosen for referral to special education services by their general education classroom teacher. I chose qualitative inquiry because it represents my worldview about the nature of knowledge and inquiry. Research in the social sciences through qualitative inquiry is about multiple interpretations of contextual events rather than about discovering what is presumed to be an already existing reality. The "belief that facts are not things outside of our interpretation in some objective world waiting to be discovered, but rather are the social constructions of humans who apprehend the world through interpretive inquiry" (Ferguson, 1993, p.36), is the foundation of interpretive research. There are multiple perceptions and constructions of the same experiences, events, or practices and through the interpretivist approach endeavored to gain an understanding of my way of seeing and knowing about myself and the world. I examined beliefs and assumptions, as I have indicated earlier in this discussion, so as to understand how I might be interpreting words or observations of others.

My purpose, as a qualitative researcher, attempted to achieve a sense of the meaning that others give to their own situations through an interpretive understanding of their language, art, gestures, and politics (Smith, 1989). I sought to understand and interpret how various participants in the school setting construct the world around them
by attempting to put myself in the place of my participants and present their experiences as thoughtfully and vividly as humanly possible. By choosing to do a qualitative study for my dissertation, I retained the flexibility to become deeply involved in the context of the classroom and school. Qualitative studies were best at contributing to a greater understanding of perceptions, attitudes, and processes (Glesne, 2006), and that was exactly my desire for this study. What were the perceptions, attitudes, and processes the teachers constructed as they made decisions about referring students to special education?

This research approach, with the flexibility it affords, was based on two major pillars. The first was the philosophical assumption that all descriptions are theory-driven or there is no such thing as theory-free knowledge. There was no “God’s eye point of view” (Nagel, 1986, p.130). There was only a point of view based on each individual’s particular interests, values, and purposes. The view people take of a situation or event will depend on their own interests and purposes (Smith & Heshusius, 1986). Empiricists claim they can achieve this theory-free knowledge with proper methodology, but I found it impossible to separate the cognitive part of my mind and the value-laden part of my mind. Doing so, in fact, is impossible for all of us as human beings. Qualitative research methodologies recognize there is no separation.

The second pillar was the understanding that by conducting a qualitative, interpretivist study, I did not use any prescriptive techniques. Put simply, there was no “one right way” or no one set of techniques in doing a qualitative study (Gallagher, 1995). If one adhered to proper empiricial techniques, then one believed that the descriptions we made would match actual conditions in the world and we would know
when they did not (Smith & Heshusius, 1986). Gadamer (1975) held that meaning is not something that can be produced methodically; it just happens because we are in the world. From the qualitative perspective, all that we could really do was match descriptions to other descriptions. Whatever descriptions I chose to match depended on my interest, focus, and purpose at the time. That is, I engaged in the “never-ending process (hermeneutical) of interpreting the interpretations of others (Smith & Heshusius, 1986, p.9)

Thus, I approached this inquiry from a hermeneutical interpretivist perspective. The interpretation of meaning is the focus of educational inquiry. Meaning must be interpreted through social and human action. Interpreting a person’s body movements, verbal action, or written action, each of which a person could refrain from doing if he or she so chose, is one mode of action to be considered (Smith, 1993). Another consideration is the social meaning embedded in every human action. The background knowledge of the interpreter based on the social and historical context of the times must be understood as itself constructed. As the researcher, I interpreted the motives, intentions, and purposes of my participants while I also attempted to recognize my own motives, intentions, and purposes in as far as it was possible to do so (Smith, 1993).

Any action a human being performs with another is a social action, but to interpret it, a context is needed. If one changes the social context, he or she changes the interpretation. That was referred to as the hermeneutical circle (Kerdeman, 1998)—continually moving back and forth between the context and behavior in order to arrive at an interpretation of what is going on. That is, understanding becomes possible when
there is a connectedness between what is familiar and what is strange. I must at least be familiar with what I am trying to interpret or the interpretation would be difficult to do. On the other hand, if everything were familiar, there would be no need for interpretation. “Interpretation is stimulated by difference and distance. As a consequence of encountering difference, the familiar is transformed; the Other also undergoes change in the dialectic of understanding” (Kerdman, 1998, p.244).

For meaningful interpretations, there must be “a process that can have no absolute beginning point or ending point” (Smith, 1986, pg.5). “Because hermeneutics is a theory of understanding, it is also, not surprising, a theory of self-understanding” (Smith, 1993,p.184). It is important to be aware of the conflicting desires we have of ourselves as human beings, because whether we realize it or not our desires are imposed upon the people with whom we interact (Kerdeman, 1998).

While there is no single voice on the topic of hermeneutics, the philosophical version had the greatest implication for my inquiry. Philosophical hermeneutics is based on Gadamer’s (1975) explanation of understanding. The implication for my inquiry from the standpoint of philosophical hermeneutics was the acknowledgement of my prejudices, which were a compilation of my past. They must be brought to the level of explicit realization (Smith, 1993). This is not to say that I was entirely trapped by my prejudices, but rather that I attempted to be open to risking and testing my prejudices in my work. The questioning back and forth between myself and others “is not a matter of abandoning one’s own standpoint and grasping another. On the contrary, a dialogical encounter of questions and answers is a fusion of horizons” (Smith, 1993, p. 196). With that in mind, I
saw my prejudice as standing at a vantage point; from that point, I tried to see other points of view, through discussion between myself and others. Moreover, I aimed to critically examine my presuppositions and allowed them to be brought to the surface of my understanding. I strove to make my inquiry much like a conversation where I attempted to arrive at mutual understandings of the meanings and intentions of the classroom teacher.

**Ethical Considerations**

There was much to be considered from an ethical standpoint as I conducted this interpretive inquiry. As Glesne (2006) reminded each interpretive researcher, these ethical considerations are inseparable from the researcher’s everyday actions with participants. Therefore, I remained mindful of the all too human propensity to impose the “world” as I know it onto my participants’ world. I tried to develop my relationship with each teacher so that she was not constrained or guarded in her comments to me. As stated before, I envisioned our conversations as so routine in nature that questions and answers flowed freely between us. I was able to accomplish that conversational relationship with one of my participants, however, I did not feel I had arrived at that same level with the other.

I am not sure I succeeded in my conscious intention of trying not to impose myself and my beliefs into my participants’ world. Just by asking certain questions, I found one of my participants self-reflecting during the interview. The questions I asked had the unintended consequence of revealing, or were interpreted as revealing, my beliefs and values. For example, one participant had a student prone to temper tantrums after not
receiving a Snickers bar for not achieving 100 percent on her spelling test; I asked if she had ever heard of Alfie Kohn’s (1993) work. I didn’t describe his work or refer to her student but I asked this question as a natural follow-up to one of her responses. My participant smiled and said, “I have his book,” and then proceeded to defend why she would not discontinue the Snickers reward system. I sensed she thought I felt it was wrong and therefore she needed to defend her practice. Without trying, I was not able to separate my self, values and beliefs from the study, and my participants recognized that in some instances.

The goal of behaving in an ethical manner, whether as a researcher, or in any of my number of roles—woman, educator, wife, mother, and so on—was certainly one I continually worked to achieve but found extremely difficult to do because of the gray areas of living. It would be a lot easier, as Eisner (1998) pointed out, if there were simple rules to apply to life or to a qualitative inquiry so that we could be taught them, apply them, and subsequently enjoy be confident that we were behaving ethically. Unfortunately, life and qualitative inquiry do not have such clean and simple rules. To guide my ethical thinking for the research part of my life, there were considerations and principles under which I operated.

The first consideration was to obtain an informed consent from each of my participants. This is standard practice for most researchers, but for an interpretive study it is a complicated concept. Informed consent implies that I was able to anticipate the events that occurred with my participants (Eisner, 1998), which was problematic. For instance, while I was conducting an observation one of my participant’s classroom, I was
called out of the room by the occupational therapist from the local area education agency. She had been working with the teacher and her students and had some concerns she wanted to share with me. Her concerns were related to the teacher's behavior, but because I had not anticipated there would be relevant comments from the occupational therapist I had not obtained an informed consent from her.

With informed consent also came related questions: Would the participants have the opportunity to read and comment on the study before it is published? Would their comments, good or bad, be included in the study? Would I provide assistance to students and paraprofessionals if asked? As Eisner (1998) pointed out, it is uncertain if the participants had been informed when “they did not have the technical sophistication or expertise to raise these questions” (p.217). As a researcher, did I have the ethical responsibility to warn them of these issues. If so, how would that have affected the research?

After anticipating these possibilities, I did not let the participants read or comment on any part of the study nor will they be allowed to do so before it is published. No one has asked to do so up to this point, so it has not been a problem. There was no need for me to interview any of the students during this study. I found the study focused on the teachers’ thinking and behavior, and it was not necessary to ask the students for any further information.

When I was in the classroom observing my participants, there would be an occasional student who would come over to me and want to see what I was doing on my computer, as I used my laptop to record my observations. I didn’t know what to tell
them. If I told them I was watching them and the teacher, it would possibly have an
effect on what they did next. If I told them it was none of their concern and go back to
their seat, that also could possibly have an effect on their behavior. I also didn’t want
them to think unkindly about adults in a school building. I wanted to interfere as little as
possible with what they were doing, although clearly my presence in the classroom
changed what was occurring there, so I responded by saying I was here to “watch them
work” and I wanted them to “go back and do what they were supposed to do.” This
seemed to satisfy them and they appeared to carry on with their assigned tasks. I was not
approached at any time during my observations in the classroom by students who wanted
help in doing any of their assigned tasks, so I was not faced with that particular ethical
dilemma.

Confidentiality and privacy was also a consideration as I conducted this inquiry.
Teachers made occasional statements that I assumed they would not want others to hear
because those might affect their working relationships. If such statements were
necessary to understand the teacher’s point of view and the context in which she was
working, I included the comments in my analysis. However, I attempted to do so with
sensitivity to the teachers’ possible reactions. The teachers did not decline to answer any
question posed, so possibly my concern for their privacy has been excessive.

There were two broad principles that guided my ethical thinking; I met them in
my Qualitative Inquiry coursework. They appealed to me and they served me well. The
first was: What would happen if everyone acted like this—what would the world be like?
This was a self-examination question I used to determine if I was acting ethically. The
second came from the Christian Bible: would I want this done to me? By keeping these two guiding principles as the foundation of my ethical decisions, I found I made decisions I could live with.

Selection of Participants

For my study, I was granted access to teachers in a rural, elementary school in Northeast Iowa. The principal and I have known each other for several years and she had recommended two first grade teachers she thought I should invite to participate in my study. When I was a principal, the first grade teachers referred more students to special education than any other teachers. When I inquired whether or not this was still the case in this particular school, the principal confirmed that fact. However, this inquiry found the four students followed throughout the study did not become eligible for special education, a fact I could not have determined prior to the selection of my teachers.

The elementary school was included in my current job assignment as an administrator for an area education agency. Consequently I have had the opportunity to become somewhat familiar with the school culture. For example, I knew the school culture believed the special education teachers were respected for their dedication to students. The special education program was thought by the teachers to be very beneficial for students. I also knew, once the students had been placed in special education, the majority of them remain there for the remainder of their elementary years.

This backyard research did set up certain types of interactions that may have constrained the data I collected (Glesne, 2006), but I also feel it allowed for a more open inquiry. I acknowledged there could be political consequences to conducting this
research, but by following my two guiding principles—what would happen if everyone acted like this and would I want this done to me—I trust they will be minimal. However, as the researcher, I needed to be aware of my previously constructed knowledge and how it influenced my research interpretations.

The two main participants, Lynn and Ann (not their real names), were white, middle class, experienced first grade teachers in their early thirties, each married with at least one child of her own. Lynn was a vibrant, red-headed teacher who spent a portion of her free time training for marathons. I knew Lynn by sight because I had met her a year before, when I accompanied her principal and a team of teachers to see how another school “did inclusion.” Other than a few comments and questions Lynn had made during that trip, we didn’t know each other.

During the interviews, Lynn smiled a lot and displayed her friendly and welcoming nature. When I was alone with Lynn at her home, she laughed frequently and was very hospitable, offering me a Diet Coke when I arrived. She was anxious to do whatever she could for my study and shared with me on two different occasions that her sister was also interested in getting her doctorate and she, herself, might someday as well. She thought she might want to teach at the college level. Lynn had already completed her Master’s degree in Reading and seemed eager to continue learning about educational topics.

Lynn was willing to talk to me as many times as I wanted, although I felt an obligation to follow my IRB approval and limit my interviews to the number Lynn agreed to when she signed the consent form. I came to understand Lynn through four formal
interviews, numerous informal chats before and after my observations of her classroom, and attending Child Study Team meetings with her. The more we came to know each other, the more I felt she was willing to share her professional life and belief system with me.

When I entered her classroom for an observation and she was alone, she would smile and seemed genuinely pleased to see me. There was one occasion that I remember because it was so unusual, in which she just looked up from her desk and commented, “you are just here to observe right?” I interpreted that to mean not to bother talking to her on that day. So I found my observation spot and waited for students to return to the room. Later, she told me she cried that night because she was so overwhelmed by her professional responsibilities. The students and the demands of the job were taking over her life and she couldn’t seem to get ahead. Planning for the next day was all she was able to do.

I was able to observe four of Lynn’s Child Study Team meetings. Lynn had two students, Colin and Emma, whom she brought into the referral process. She struggled with how to help Colin with his reading and his behavior. Emma was solely a behavior problem for Lynn. I followed these two students from Lynn’s perspective through the process as they continued in their first grade classes. During the Child Study Team meetings I found her to be pleasant, professional, and direct. She didn’t let the meetings continue without her questions and needs being met. It appeared the respect was reciprocated, as principal, counselors and teachers all seemed to respect Lynn and her
work with students. They allowed her to lead the meeting and supported her position and explanations of student problems.

Ann was a slender woman, professionally dressed who conducted herself in a reserved and controlled manner whenever I was present. She was a part-time teacher, teaching only in the mornings. From my observation, Ann was the dominant teacher responsible for any special education referrals. The classroom environment appeared to me to be organized by Ann, with her teaching partner adapting as necessary when she arrived in the afternoon.

Because of my current position, I had met Ann previous to this study during an IEP meeting for one of her students. Beyond the confines of the IEP meeting and that one particular student, I didn’t know anything about Ann or her classroom. Ann shared little beyond the questions I asked. When the interviews were over, the conversation didn’t continue. Perhaps that was because she was on a tight schedule and needed to pick her children up from the babysitter following the interview. She was friendly, smiled frequently and was very willing to talk to me within her boundaries of time and space. I did not have opportunities to talk with her informally when I came to observe her classroom, as she always had students with her. I wasn’t able to interview her during recess time as I was able to do in Lynn’s classroom. When the students went to lunch, Ann would sit down with me and answer my questions. It was a bit more difficult to get our schedules together for observations and interviews because of her part-time employment.
Ann had two students, Seth and Miranda, whom I attempted to follow through the referral process. Both of Ann's students, however, had already started in the process before I began my study so I felt as if I was coming into the middle of the movie. Her professional demeanor in the classroom was carried into team meetings as well and was never penetrated by team members in the meetings I attended. They respected the work she did and let her lead the team meetings. She worked hard at communicating with parents and being the kind of teacher she thought she should be.

Data Collection

Before beginning my study, I practiced interviewing a teacher I knew fairly well who was not going to be part of my study, in accordance with a suggestion made at my proposal defense. I wanted to know if the questions I had prepared were good questions, eliciting helpful responses, and I wanted to practice responding to the answers the teacher gave me. So I spent the latter part of January practicing for the real study. From this practice, I found I needed to be a more critical listener and ask more open ended questions than I did during this time.

But I still didn't really know where to start when it was time to begin. I considered starting with the physical observation of the school and the classrooms. I questioned what I should be looking for and what was important. I decided I would first begin with my participants rather than the setting because they were the true object of my interest and my research questions focused more on what they thought than it did on anything else. I scheduled my interviews with both Lynn and Ann and then I didn't know what to ask. My practice questions seemed inadequate and my proposal questions
seemed too personal for the first interview, so I began on safer ground in an attempt to
develop some trust and rapport with both my participants.

I conducted four formal tape-recorded interviews with my first participant, Lynn, in her home on February 5th, February 27th, April 12th, and April 26th, each lasting at least an hour and sometimes longer. During the first interview, Lynn seemed much more comfortable than I. She was eager to answer my questions and tell me what she thought. Many times upon asking a question, Lynn would look toward the ceiling and formulate her answers, thinking about the question for a second or two before she responded. She asked very few clarifying questions.

I, on the other hand, was nervous. I felt like an interviewer. The process seemed contrived and not conversational as I had envisioned. I wanted to get to the conversational tone I suggested in my proposal but it stayed at the interviewer/interviewee level during this first interview. I don’t think I responded and listened well during that first interview. I knew I had to get better at listening and asking the right questions at the right time to really understand her world if we were to fuse our horizons. Over time, trust was built and I felt like we both moved into the conversational interview in the third and fourth sessions.

At one point, the tape recorder stopped working and that upset me. I had practiced turning it on, recording, flipping the tape, yet I was worried about not capturing all her thoughts on tape. When it stopped working, I panicked. Then I got the tape sides mixed up so it took more time to figure out what was recorded already and what wasn’t. I didn’t want to record over the thirty minutes of data I already had accumulated. I
fumbled with the machine until I got it working. Lynn just laughed at me and said she would answer the questions over if I needed her to do so. She graciously said, "If we have to do this over because the tape recorder doesn't get it, it doesn't matter. I am totally fine with it." She didn’t appear to be worried about the time that it would take, although I assured her I would only take an hour of her time. Luckily, I got the recorder working again in just a few minutes.

I felt there were times Lynn wanted to put forth the image of what she thought I thought a good teacher should be. Her understanding of what she thought she should be doing didn’t always materialize in her classroom. For example, I would have my questions prepared for the interview and have them lying on the table where I could see them. I would have the tape recorder going and then I could record observations, comments, and thoughts on paper as well. Occasionally I saw Lynn looking and trying to read the questions before I asked them. She even told me that she saw the word constructivism and was trying to think of what that was while I was asking her another question. She said she knew about it and that it was something she should probably be doing but wasn’t.

After each interview when the tape recorder was shut off, she continued to talk about various topics, mostly professional, as I walked out the door. She would ask me about qualitative or quantitative studies and what that meant. She also talked more about their Building Learning Team and trying to decide on goals for the next school year and that the data didn’t really show anything so they were thinking about differentiated
instruction. She also wanted me to talk to her about behavior strategies. I shared with her what our agency was doing to support districts in that area.

I also had the opportunity to informally visit with Lynn when I came to do an observation. We had a few minutes alone while her students were at recess. We would chat about the morning, what her evening was like, some personal topics about her daughter or husband, or maybe a follow-up question from an interview or a team meeting. I never took notes during these informal conversations. Rather, I would record the comments and thoughts when I went back to my car. I observed in Lynn’s room the mornings of February 20th and February 28th, March 7th near the end of the school day, and mid-morning on March 28th, each observation lasting about thirty minutes. I would record what the class was doing, what the teacher was doing, and what the two students who were placed in the referral process were doing. I found it difficult to capture all that was happening in the classroom. It was difficult to know what to pay attention to and what to let go. I also spent more than four hours in the early evenings in March when no one was present, recording the physical environment of Lynn’s classroom.

I attended three Child Study Team meetings, which met for the purpose of discussing students who were referred into the special education process, each lasting approximately forty minutes, about Colin, one of Lynn’s students. These were held on February 12, April 9th, and again on May 15th. I attended two Child Study Team meetings for Emma, another one of her students on March sixth and April twenty-third. At each of those meetings I was given the same information as the other team members which included the classroom teacher, principal, counselor, a Western Hills (not the real
name) employee such as a school psychologist or speech and language pathologist, and anyone else who might have information regarding the student. These team members varied with each student. No agenda was given for any meeting, only the name of the student being discussed.

The team met in the conference room at the school. It was a small room with no windows. A long table with adult chairs was the only furniture in it. There were posters on the wall encouraging social skills for students and adults. There was also a clock in the room. I would position myself near the center of the table so my tape recorder was more likely to pick up people’s comments from either end of the table.

The flow of thought and decision making was difficult to follow during the team meetings. Many times people seemed to talk at once or interrupt one another before their sentences were complete. At times, individuals interrupted themselves with different thoughts, without completing their sentences. Lynn, in particular, did this quite often. When I was transcribing the tapes from those meetings, I wasn’t sure who made a comment because the voices were either too soft or there was combined talking. Learning from my first transcribed meeting, thereafter I tried to record by hand who was talking by writing down their names or if the exchanges came too fast, I would use their initials and take sketchy notes as to the content of what they were saying. This method helped me to decipher some of the confusion as to who might be talking when I was transcribing. This was only a problem if a person made brief comments. If the narrative was longer, it was not a problem to determine who was speaking.
I did not complete my data collection without making mistakes. Upon reflection, I suspect my biggest mistake occurred during one of Lynn’s Child Study Team Meetings. The team members were having difficulty deciding about what to do to intervene with a child who had behavior issues. They weren’t sure of the process for a behavior concern because they had in the past dealt mostly with academic concerns of students. So they looked at me, not as a researcher, but in my current role as an educator, and asked me what I thought they should do.

For some unknown reason, I shut off the tape recorder for my reply. My thought at the time was that my response was not part of the study, but truly it was. I realized later that I should have left it running. I regretted my decision, but could not go back and rewind the meeting. Everything in a qualitative inquiry was to be a part of the study. I knew I could not separate myself from my role as researcher and as educator and yet I attempted to do so. I could have decided later whether or not to include the discussion in the study. My response to their question was short and I immediately turned the tape recorder back on when I concluded. After transcribing the tape, I realized the team didn’t take my suggestions or thoughts and appeared to carry on as if I hadn’t responded.

Ann was my second participant, and I first interviewed her on February 6th. She chose the school counselor’s office as the setting for the interview. Ann had gotten her lunch from the cafeteria to eat during the interview, but she didn’t touch it, even though I encouraged her once or twice to do so. I was not as nervous with Ann as I had been with Lynn, perhaps because I had already been through an interview with Lynn. With Ann, more than with Lynn, I was reminded of interviewing applicants for a teaching position.
My experience with interviewing as a principal was rising to the surface with Ann. I don’t know why I felt that way with her. Perhaps it was because she seemed more guarded with her responses than Lynn did. I thought after the first interview this feeling would subside, but I found each subsequent interview with her to be guarded. I thought she was saying what was expected of her, rather than what she really wanted to say. I don’t believe I ever achieved a conversational level of talking during our interviews.

My second interview with Ann was held on March 6th and was quite similar to the first interview. Again, I again felt like she was interviewing with me for a teaching position. I am not sure she felt that way, but my experience as a principal was again brought to the forefront of my mind as I interviewed Ann. The setting was not the counselor’s office this time, but rather a large, carpeted common area surrounded by classrooms. We sat at a small round table with short chairs designed for first graders. Ann purchased a school lunch once again, but didn’t eat very much of it during our interview. Students were leaving the various classrooms to go to lunch so it was quite noisy from their chatter. I was recording the interviews but the background noise made it occasionally difficult to hear what was said. I worried about that possibility and inquired about a quieter space, but according to Ann, there was no other space available at the time. Her own classroom was occupied by her teaching partner, who was planning for the afternoon.

During the first and second interviews, Ann was quick to answer and quick to complete my sentences. She frequently would look down at the table and begin a long narrative about the topic. There was not a time where she reflected to any degree before
she answered. There were no clarifying questions from her as to what I might be asking. Maybe she felt it was her obligation to know all the answers to my questions. I sensed Ann wanted to be the very best teacher she could be and wanted to be sure she portrayed that by answering my questions with what she perceived were the “right” answers.

The third and final interview with Ann was on April 19th. Again, we were in the common area outside her classroom. People were walking by, and students could be heard talking in the classrooms surrounding the common area. The interview was much the same as the first two, questions and answers. I felt more at ease in that I was more comfortable probing her thinking, but the narratives from her were long and complicated. There were many thoughts in one response, so it was difficult at times for me to pull out the important ideas for her to expand on in order for me to understand better what her world was like. I did not have the opportunity to interview Ann informally at any other times during this study.

I was able to observe in Ann’s classroom twice during this study, once in February and again in April; both were in the morning as that was the only time she taught. I sat in the back of the room with my laptop computer and recorded student/teacher interactions, particularly with Seth and Miranda, the students she had brought to the Child Study Team. I also recorded the actions of the other students in case I wanted to compare how Ann responded to their behavior with her responses to Seth and Miranda. The students were extremely quiet and worked on their tasks during both observations. No student approached me for help nor questioned why I was there or what I was doing.
One day when Ann took her class to lunch, I came to record the physical environment of her room. I spent the entire hour recording the arrangement of the furniture, the curriculum materials, and the information on the walls. On two other occasions I came to record the physical environment in the afternoon while the students were in class with the other teacher. I did not feel comfortable coming after school to record my observations, so I worked it into my schedule as best I could and Ann was very agreeable to whatever worked for me.

The first Child Study Team meeting I attended for Ann's student Seth was held on February 20th. Earlier they had met on Seth's organizational problems, and this meeting was about his writing difficulties. We met in the same conference room as we did for Lynn's student and I again attempted to sit in the middle of the table with my tape recorder close by. The meeting was directed by Ann with no particular agenda topics or order to the discussion. When the discussion about Seth ended, Ann and the team began discussing Miranda, Ann's other student in the referral system. The meeting on these students lasted for nearly an hour and was held while her students were at lunch.

I was not notified of the March meeting for Seth and sent a gentle reminder to Ann to invite me to any other meetings the team was having on him. I was invited and was able to attend the final meeting of the year on May fourteenth. All of Ann's team meetings were easier to transcribe as there seemed to be fewer interruptions and less simultaneous talking than during Lynn's meetings.
Data Analysis

Much can be said for working with experienced researchers who attempt to support those of us new to the endeavor. While I have learned, watched, and collaborated with an experienced researcher, the real work of my inquiry had to be mastered alone. I acknowledged Ferguson’s (1993) opinion that analysis was the most challenging of the skills to be mastered because of its dependence on reflective and prolonged thought as a solitary task. In Ferguson’s (1993) work with doctoral students who wanted to become interpretivist researchers, she discovered she could not tell students how to learn what they need to learn; they must learn from experience. I found myself engaged in reflective thought numerous times throughout the day, whether I was directly working on the study or not. The prolonged periods of thought were the times that I found to be the most productive.

I attempted to look for similarities and themes in my data collection as I interpreted the thoughts and actions of others. This was not an easy task and I found myself understanding the challenges faced by the Child Study Teams as they attempted to use the data they had collected on a student. I had information collected, but I was not sure if that information was adequate, pertinent, or significant. To me it seemed this was exactly what the team members struggled with as well. They knew they had to collect data, but they were not sure what data to collect; when data were presented to them, they didn’t know what to do with them.

I sifted and sorted the data: team, interview, observation notes into various groups based on commonalities. Then a word or phrase which I hadn’t noticed before became
obvious when I reread it and caused me to rethink the category. Or, conversely, sometimes when I thought about the commonalities and what Lynn or Ann told me, I began to see a message on a different level. It was exasperating at times. I wanted to represent Lynn and Ann’s world as fairly and honestly as I could. I didn’t want to fabricate a line of thinking that may not have been there, yet each word carried with it an understanding, and only Lynn or Ann truly knew for sure what they meant by it.

When I felt steeped in the data, not knowing which theme to follow, I decided to present the data as case studies and did a cross-case study analysis. When comparing the cases, there were only two main differences between the way Lynn and Ann viewed their educational world, while the commonalities between the two were both more numerous and more apparent. My only remaining concern with the analysis is the impression it would make on my participants if they read it. The differences and commonalities are mine, and I suspect they would not be ones that Lynn nor Ann would articulate if asked.

A reviewer may have some sort of criteria in mind when reading my inquiry accounts. This list of criteria, however, must be fluid and change as my inquiry will differ from other inquiries. Such a reviewer should not dismiss this fluidity for its novelty, but rather embrace the new perspective and consider revising the list of criteria. I adopted the four criteria Richardson (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2000) used when she judged papers for social scientific publication. The first criterion was substantive contribution. I continually asked myself if my work has contributed to the understanding of how teachers identify the special needs student. In order for me to accomplish that task, I strove to give the reader the most credible account of the culture of the school, the
social organization and power within the school, and particularly the individuals in the school as much as was possible.

The second criterion recommended by Richardson (2000) was aesthetic merit. I did not want my work to be dull and boring, triggering little thought and interpretation by the reader. Instead, I wished to be creative in my analysis and produce a narrative which was be satisfying to the reader and complex enough to understand the multiple realities of the actors in it.

The third criterion used was reflexivity. I continued to delve into myself and see who I was and how it related to what I produced. I asked myself, have I shared enough of myself so the reader could judge for himself or herself my point of view? I needed to hold myself accountable for knowing and telling of the people I have come to know.

Lastly, the criterion of impact was another way to judge the merit of my interpretive research. I wanted my research to have an impact on the reader. I wanted it to move the reader, either intellectually or emotionally, so that new questions were asked or new action was taken.
CHAPTER 4
LYNN

My First Encounter

I was moderately anxious as I walked up the sidewalk leading to Lynn’s home in a white, middle class neighborhood on a cold evening in February. She was a major participant for my study and this was my first interview with her. I found my way to her door with my questions, tape recorder, and blank tapes in hand, and a neophyte’s anxiety in my heart. While I knew the evening would consist of me asking questions and her responding, I wondered how comfortable and forthcoming she would be with me. Would she speak from her heart or from her head—revealing to me what she thought she should say or rather how she actually felt about her teaching? I worried whether my perceptiveness would allow me to represent Lynn and her world skillfully enough so others would understand. I wanted to build enough rapport with her to make this interview and subsequent interviews more conversational than intrusive and formal. This was my first attempt into authentic qualitative research, and I desperately wanted it to go well.

When I rang the doorbell, Lynn and her three year old daughter greeted me and welcomed me into the house. Once inside, Lynn introduced me formally to her daughter and her husband who were on their way to Walmart. I immediately felt that I was the cause of their vacating the house, but Lynn assured me she was the one who wanted them to leave so that “I am not distracted by the noise and needs of my daughter.” No longer feeling responsible for their departure, I reminded myself that Lynn wanted to be
interviewed in her house “because it would be more relaxed and thoughtful than if we did it at school.” I was grateful because it meant to me that she was taking her participation in my study very seriously.

I followed Lynn past the dining room, living room, kitchen and down the stairs to the basement. The room at the bottom of the stairs was a more casual living space which was furnished with a dark brown couch complete with gigantic puffy pillows. It was a sectional couch and was placed in the shape of the letter “L.” We sat facing each other across the “L.” It was hard for me to get comfortable enough to take notes and to keep an eye on my tape recorder to make sure it didn’t malfunction, but Lynn seemed comfortable so I made the space work for me as well. While we talked, Lynn hugged a pillow and often looked up at the ceiling while formulating her answers. She laughed frequently at her own responses. I felt she was nervous, as was I, but I also felt she was genuine. I became more and more comfortable with her and found myself thinking more like the teacher I once was than the novice researcher I was currently representing. The questions I had prepared were only the way into the interview. Her responses and my desire to understand them led to different questions than those I had prepared.

**A Brief Insight into Lynn’s History**

People might assume that teachers become teachers because they enjoyed and were successful in their own schooling experience. Lynn’s own experience confirms this assumption. She has been teaching first grade for ten years and during that time had earned her Master Degree in Reading. “Someday,” she told me, “I would like to get my doctorate.” The idea of attending classes and learning in a formal structure appealed to
her. The lecture-format teachers and professors used in her classes from high school
through graduate school fit her style of learning. “I like to be a student. I like lectures,
taking notes and I learn well that way. I like reading books...” answered Lynn as I asked
her about her learning preferences. She elaborated:

Yeah, my favorite classes are not ones where you have to stand up and do silly
things... they say, people learn better when they do things kinesthetically and I do
like to do things, you know if it is a computer. If it is a task-oriented thing, I do
like to be told how to do it and then be given the chance to do it. But if it is more
information stuff I just kinda like it to be (she laughs) I like notes and outlines and
memorization...those things came easy to me.

I didn’t know until I observed Lynn’s classroom that this was the way she approached
learning for her first grade students. Lynn was the center of teaching and learning for her
students. She planned what the students would do, when they would do it, and how they
would do it. Her lesson plans for the students consisted of a combination of
memorization and task completion. Her lesson’s objective or goal would be presented to
students in such a way, if appropriate, as to give them the opportunity to use all of their
senses.

Even though Lynn enjoyed being a student and learning through her college
classes, she felt they did little to prepare her for her actual teaching experience. At the
time, her preservice coursework covered material that seemed applicable to any teaching
situation, but helpful in no specific situation. One of her required courses was The
Exceptional Learner and it was in preparation for teaching students of varied abilities.
Yet, Lynn reflects, “Now having taught and now looking back on it, I don’t really feel
like it gave me much practical knowledge.” It was the lack of what she considered
practical, helpful knowledge that left Lynn wondering what to draw upon to use in her
day-to-day teaching. She reached out to other teachers and resources because the course itself was not enough to provide her with the information she needed to make day to day decisions for her students. She stated, “I don’t really remember any concrete things to try...I think until you start teaching it’s really hard to know what you are talking about, you know what I mean? Until you are the one doing it.”

Lynn’s beliefs about students, particularly special education students, came not only from her coursework and current teaching experiences but also from her belief system as she matured into adulthood. The social experiences she had as an elementary and high school student contributed to her assumptions about students who struggle in school. For example, she remembered two students who were “just LD” and for the most part were “pulled out and eventually both did go to another school,” but she couldn’t remember why the two students were sent to another school. Of one of the students, she recalled, “I would say in early years I remember him being with everybody, but as school got harder I remember him feeling isolated and probably picked on quite a bit.” When I asked her to tell me more about what she meant by the term “picked on” she described it this way:

Just kind of picked on and not really popular, was kind of socially awkward as well and didn’t really fit in. And the older he got he was bused to another school...and I do think both of them dropped out of school later in high school. Neither went to high school with us. I don’t remember being formally told in class by the teacher where they went. Like I said it was a small town and everyone kind of knew. I do think that even in elementary school that you were just aware that school was hard [for them]...you know, as a child you just think they weren’t smart. I don’t really remember thinking that necessarily, but that they needed to go to school someplace else.
Thus began Lynn’s understanding of students who were required to “fit” into the school system and, when they didn’t, were sent elsewhere because it was a better “fit.” In Lynn’s world today, that better “fit” is not necessarily another school, but is more likely to be the room down the hall with the special education teacher.

Lynn’s comment about being “just LD” piqued my attention. Thinking this would give me insight into her thinking about disabilities, I probed to find out what she meant by that phrase. She replied:

I suppose I meant that they were not physically handicapped or not physically different... I think, you know back to the old definition of LD where they... had enough intelligence that their performance didn’t match that level. Although now that I think about it maybe their IQ wasn’t—you know, maybe their IQ was lower. And the more I think about one particularly...[and] about ADD or ADHD, he did really seem—I know it took him a while to do his work, it was really sloppy, things were pouring on the floor from his desk and some of the organization stuff, I know that was really kind of hard. So maybe that was something nobody ever talked ---you hadn’t heard of it then.

Referring to the “old” definition of a learning disability as a discrepancy between a student’s performance level and “enough intelligence” was Lynn’s framework for understanding educational “disabilities” absent an obvious physical difference that could be identified. She placed the student’s learning problem within the student and did not look elsewhere for the causes. This statement indicated to me that she accepted an IQ score as the measure of a student’s competence, and she espoused the use of labels to categorize and explain a student’s behavior. For example, she recognized a student as being disorganized and sloppy which she was now able to generalize to the Attention Deficit Disorder category. Lynn’s experiences with these students have, in part,
informed her belief system about learning and students with differences and, reciprocally, her belief system has informed her experiences.

**Lynn's Beliefs about Teaching and Learning**

When I inquired about her life as a first grade teacher, Lynn shared these thoughts: “I teach first grade and I would probably say that, well, every year you have students that struggle and I think that often first grade is a year when learning problems start to become apparent.” Lynn assumed as a matter of course that there would be students every year for which learning was difficult. These unfortunate students’ learning “deficits” became “problems” for her as a teacher when students failed to grasp a concept by the time she was ready to move to another. Lynn recognized all students learn in different ways, but she didn’t mention to me her understanding that students also learn at different rates. She explained to me that she was “trying to get into their brain in as many different modalities as possible” because some children learn better by seeing something, others by hearing it, and others by doing it. As she expressed it, “…the chances of you hitting more or all of your students are greater…the more ways you have to do it.” Lynn has had her students write their reading words in shaving cream on their desks, trace them on their legs, and write them in the air all while they also say them out loud. This was her way of varying the “modalities” to reach all kinds of learners.

However, when it came to the content that students were to learn, Lynn scheduled and planned the content for the day. She spent approximately 20 minutes a day on phonics because she felt struggling readers struggle because “they are often missing their phonics.” So she spent class time drilling students on phonics. Her lesson plans on a
particular day read "oi" and "oy" because on that day she was going to concentrate on those sounds with the students. Yet, she reflected:

I think that for kids who just learn to read, you know, those kids who just come to school knowing how to read, I think somehow they just figure, their brain just figures it out. You know that they didn’t need to be taught or told all that—but the kids, but why make those struggling readers figure it out on their own? ...I just recently took a class, an Orton Gillingham class, and I do think it taught me a lot of phonics things that I didn’t know, that I obviously just figured out at some point in my life. ...And so this year I have done a much better job at teaching kids what the rules are ...I think a lot of teachers don’t know all the rules. And I just think that why make the kids try to figure out on their own? I just give them... I know just from talking to the Title 1—teachers so often 5th graders who are struggling readers, they don’t know their short vowel sounds, and to me that is phonics...I do think that for those lower kids if they don’t have phonics, they can’t spend that time actually reading.

Lynn knew the students needed to be reading to learn how to read, and she placed a very high importance on learning the phonics as the gateway skill toward that goal.

To begin to understand how Lynn distinguished between garden-variety learning problems and "identifiable" disabilities; I specifically asked her how she defined "disability."

I feel, as a teacher, it is always changing as far as special ed goes and how they, I don’t really feel like any more that they come right out and say your child has a learning disability. I haven’t been in a meeting for a long time where they have actually said that. You know, where they used to do IQ testing then I would hear that. You know, they would say, they would explain to parents, that your child is bright, it just means they are not working up to their potential and that is a good thing, it means that they are smart and so then you know they describe the discrepancy and so then they would say, so based on these things that your child, you know we would say your child has a learning disability. I have been in meetings like that and I haven’t been in a meeting like that for you know, I would say probably 5 years or so...maybe it has only been 3 or 4 years.
She recognized that the label terminology which described a student’s learning problem was no longer discussed with parents, but as a teacher she knew there were children who still experienced learning difficulties. Lynn explained it like this,

I think that there are certainly kids who are not learning for one reason or another...I think that if you are not learning that is a disability, you are not able to do something that maybe your peers are. I do, I think that we shouldn’t just rename things. It didn’t go away...It has always been there, we just call it something different. And I do think we are calling lots of things a name that we hadn’t heard of ten years ago.

With Lynn’s explanation, it was clear that she was defining disability as “not learning” in comparison to peers. From her perspective, it’s the students’ fault for not learning—they are the ones with the deficiency. She did seem to recognize that labels which were affixed to behaviors have been created and recreated over time. Still, regardless of whatever society had chosen to name or not name as a disability, Lynn had her own definition. “Yeah, to me, disability literally means ‘not able’ and I think that if there is something preventing you from learning or getting in the way of your learning; that is a disability.”

I wanted to explore Lynn’s beliefs about special education and in particular the philosophy of inclusion. She was familiar with the legal requirement for assignment to the least restrictive environment for a student with special needs. As a general education teacher that meant to her she had some responsibility to include students with special needs in her classroom. She described her conceptual knowledge of inclusion this way:

I think my opinion on inclusion and what I thought it was and how it works, I think it has really changed as I’ve taught...I think when I first learned about it in college, full inclusion, they are in the classroom the whole time and I don’t think I had a really good feel for what that would be like and then—and I’m embarrassed to say this—but I think when I was in my earlier years of teaching
and I had a child that was special ed, they were being pulled out, so it wasn’t at all—they just had support. ...I think in my mind subconsciously that I even did not feel responsible for their learning. I’m embarrassed to say that, but, you know, and now that I’ve taught longer I do think that the idea of inclusion is really important. I know it is good for all students. I think the organization of inclusion is harder than it’s—as far as schedules and the supports necessary to do it. ...So I do feel it is expected of us, and we are all kind of feeling like we know that we are moving that way, and we are trying to take steps to get ourselves ready. I do think, like I said, reorganization of it, that is what is probably the hardest.

Lynn was supporting inclusion as “really important” and yet she struggled with how implementation of the concept would work or even if it was possible. She attempted to fit the inclusion concept into the structures currently in place:

Well—like right now—we have a special education teacher working in kindergarten, first and second grades and they all pull out. And she has got this schedule where some kids are coming to her for fifteen to twenty minutes all throughout the day; and so, if they were all fully included in my classroom, then how would I be getting support? Or how would the kindergarten teacher be getting the same support—and the second grade teacher—if there was still just one special education teacher?

Lynn viewed inclusion as a student-teacher ratio issue and not an issue about creating community and normalizing differences. I suspect she was relating to her previous childhood experiences where she had constructed teaching and learning as making the students “fit” into the adult-created structures. Being bounded by the current “pullout” structure in her school would obscure other possible structures which could be created to support all students’ learning in one community. For example, Lynn stated:

...I don’t even know the right terminology for this, but the level 2 special education students who are not in the classroom as much—and what that would look like[if they were fully included]? If that would require more associates, you know? I think as teachers we would be more willing to have students in our room all of the time if we had more help in the form of associates, not necessarily certified teachers. But I feel like—we are all feeling like—that is not going to happen.
Students with more severe learning problems were not fully included in Lynn’s classroom because she felt she needed more adult help. Full inclusion, for Lynn, wasn’t a viable option until she got more help. Lynn expressed how having more associates would support inclusive practices this way:

You would just be individualizing more, and you are needing to give more students individual help and your struggling students who may be in special ed need more one-on-one assistance. And how do you manage your classroom if you are constantly giving? I mean you are only one person and they are first graders—and center time and guided reading is difficult enough.

Lynn’s belief that inclusion translated into individualizing more caused her to view it as a difficult and challenging task. Yet, being the devoted and caring teacher I perceived her to be, she articulated these thoughts:

I do feel responsible...I do really think that you are—that everyone is responsible for all the education for all the students, and I don’t think that our schools are necessarily set up that way. You know, you shut your door and you are responsible for the thirty kids in your room. But I do think I’m guilty for not following through for kids that are in my classroom, the level 2 kids. I feel I should be playing a more active role in helping them meet their goals. When they are in my room, and not doing something that may be appropriate for them, I feel like I should have things in my room to help them meet their goals.

Lynn expressed her understanding of the responsibility to meet the needs of all the children in her room including the special education students, but felt she was prevented from acting upon that responsibility by the size and demands of her large class. She knew what needed to be done as evidenced by this statement:

I do know what their [special ed students] goals are, yes. But, this is me, I haven’t had time to put some of their stuff together, but I do feel more guilty that I’m not meeting their needs as much as I should be.
Lynn was feeling guilty about her lack of attentiveness to her special education students. Knowing their goals and not planning a way to meet them when the students were in her classroom left her feeling “more guilty” than she might otherwise.

Lynn’s reasoning [or rationale] for her lack of time to prepare for her special needs students stemmed from classroom management issues that she struggled with:

When you go into teaching, you think you are going to be able to teach all day long, but really I think the behavior stuff and the management of it—I would sadly say that more of your job is you’ve got to be good at those things in order to get to teach. And if you don’t have all those things under control, you might as well not try to teach. I would say that is a large part of your job—and some years more than others—as far as you always feel like the focus of my job—from day to day is behavior.

A good teacher, from Lynn’s description would be one who could manage the behavior of the students. Lynn felt frustrated by her inability to teach the academics to her students because she was spending more time on managing the disruptive behavior of a few of her students. When I observed her classroom and when I visited with her, this was obviously a source of concern for her. I wanted to know why she thought she spent more time than she desired managing behaviors, and she responded in this way:

This year I have a very, oh, I can’t even think of a good euphemism. I just have an odd mix of kids. Some kids feed off each other and some [have] unique and strange behaviors. Some kids with possibly some serious, you know, emotional type problems—so I think that this year has been a struggle—and those behaviors most definitely linked to learning difficulties. It’s like—are they not learning because of their behavior? Is the behavior because they aren’t learning? Trying to figure all of that out.

The reason she must spend so much time managing behaviors, from her perspective, was the students themselves. The way the students were placed in her room this year caused some peer interaction difficulties which might not have been there if they were placed
differently. She also felt some students had emotional problems. She did not consider that her teaching practices might contribute to both learning and behavioral difficulties. Lynn hadn’t come to any conclusion as to the relationship between learning difficulties and behavior.

Lynn’s Understanding of the Special Education Eligibility Process

Lynn had been teaching first graders for ten years. Through those years, she had students on her roster who already had IEPs before they began first grade. Lynn also had previously referred students for special education services who were found to be entitled to those services. I asked her to explain the current referral process to me and this was her interpretation:

The process right now is, when you have a child who is struggling, through our team meetings, we call them CAT, or Child Assistant Teams, we kind of brainstorm ways to help them but we start what we call a Supplemental Plan which is something extra in addition to classroom instruction which needs to be done daily and faithfully to try and get that child back to where they need to be. Typically the way we are doing...Supplementals, is it could be something extra I do or an associate is doing extra, our Title 1 services for reading or Reading Recovery services. Those are counting as Supplementals. Because we start them we do get a baseline of data. The whole entire process is being data driven using, you know, figuring out what they know and then administering the Supplemental, the extra help and then plotting the data points. Primarily the school psychologist is helping a lot with that as far as the data points go.

After the student was on a Supplemental plan, which, according to Lynn, had to “be at least six weeks” someone was to collect and plot data points to determine if the plan should be modified. I raised the question of how she decided on the “extras” the students needed. She said:

That is really hard. As a teacher, that is hard because not at all did I think it was intended to be insulting, but it kind of is funny because you’ve been trying really
hard, now try REALLY hard. You know, it kind of—lots of times it’s just adding something extra, like they were getting ten minutes and now it’s fifteen…

I asked her what happened if the Supplemental plan did not show the child was making progress. She went on to explain what would happen next:

So after so long, I know it has to be at least six weeks, if not longer that we do the Supplemental and if that’s apparently not working then we would start an Intensive, which is kind of extra help that is not being done by the teacher and is being done by someone else and that’s kind of, I would say, a pull out thing for at least ten minutes, sometimes fifteen minutes of one-on-one instruction. The teacher is most definitely involved in the planning of what is being done during the Intensive, but we are trying to be creative in the building as far as who is giving them. I mean last year I had the Reading Recovery/Title 1 teacher, but she was doing my math Intensive for me. She had 10 minutes extra so we are trying to pull everybody that’s responsible for the education of everyone. Associates have been involved if they have ten extra minutes that they are required to do those sorts of things too.

In Lynn’s experience with the new process, she did not have any student complete a Supplemental plan and then be dropped out of the process. All the students who had a Supplemental plan were moved on to an Intensive plan. When students have not shown success on an Intensive plan, she called the parents in for a meeting. Lynn described a typical meeting with the parents:

We have a child study—the school psychologist is there and the counselor and the principal is involved and we have the parents, and we just share the data points and kind of brainstorm, and then basically it’s decided special ed services, they qualify for them or that they could get extra help.

Wondering if the results of the Intensive plan were the sole qualifying criteria, I asked Lynn if there were other things that were considered before qualifying students for special education services. She said:

I would say they are primarily based on that [Intensive plan results]. I mean, most definitely a child who has had a Supplemental or an Intensive, I think it’s probably, you know, through the teacher observations and that we—prior to ever
having gotten that far—we have brainstormed and kept team meetings and with other teachers and counselors. What else could we be doing? And so in my experience by the time it has gotten that far, you know, you are feeling that they are needing more than just classroom instruction.

According to Lynn’s description, students who were referred for special education were entitled to services based on their insufficient progress on the Intensive plan written by the team. Knowing Lynn had been in the educational system long enough to experience other referral processes, I asked her if she thought the Supplemental and Intensive plans were a better way to identify students for special education. Lynn expressed satisfaction:

So far in my experience I feel like the kids I have had—I haven’t had any frustrations where I feel like I’ve had a child who was special ed or needed help with special ed who hasn’t gotten it yet.

The new special education referral process, as understood by Lynn, was working for her. She did express some frustration when she talked about “how to make them [qualify]” and that “you have to kind of jump through [hoops], like Intensives or Supplementals,” where before it “was a different channel that you would go through.” I pressed her further and asked why she thought the process had changed. She replied:

The teachers joke that if you could coin a really good phrase, you could become rich off that. Not that I think they are reinventing the wheel all the time and I do think that—especially right now—I do think that maybe education is trying to let the science part catch up a little bit with the numbers and the data, you know, where I think that the hard thing about education is: it is a mix of art and science. So I think that you do use your observations, you do use your gut, and those things are not very objective.

When she spoke of “they” I wondered who she meant and she said, “I don’t know. I really do suppose policy makers and law makers. I do feel like it is not necessarily coming from the teachers who are doing this.” She knew the state was implementing a new referral process, and the schools needed to prepare for it and “accept it and get better
at it.” Lynn also expressed frustration at the manner in which the new process was “forced” upon them. She said:

It’s kind of one of those things where I feel like, you just don’t have the time to become educated about it and the process, you know, what the law makers are doing and you just don’t have time—you just have to accept what you are told and do it.

So Lynn accepted the new referral process and implemented it the best she knew how given the requirements as she understood them.

Classroom Environment

It was easy for me to find Lynn’s classroom once I entered Flicker Elementary. I walked in the front door of the school, continued down the hallway past the media center and student bathrooms, and found her room on the left. My initial reaction when I first glanced about the room was that it looked fairly typical of first grade classrooms—desks, tables, a reading center, shelves, counter space, and walls decorated with posters, most of which were focused on reading. What caught my eye was a console television converted by Lynn’s husband into a classroom aquarium that contained large, healthy-looking goldfish. I was also struck by the number of the tiny white rope lights strung around the bulletin board in what appeared to be her Reading Center. The lights were on a timer which meant they were never off when I was in the room.

The student desks had the flip-up tops which many first graders tried to open with their supplies still on top, spilling most onto the floor. The base and the legs of the desks were painted green, blue, or red and the combination created a multi-colored environment. Most desks were arranged in groups of four, with the exception of a single straight row facing the front of the room. Lynn’s wooden desk and chair were in a corner
of the classroom, near shelves and bookcases where she stored her teaching materials. Her desk was frequently covered with papers and incidental materials which constricted her work area.

One of the focal points of Lynn’s room was the Reading Center. The floor in that area was covered with a large carpet which was divided into five columns of color: red, orange, green, blue, and purple. In addition there were white lines: vertical lines dividing the five columns and horizontal lines dividing the rug into six rows. As a result, there were thirty squares, each large enough for a child to sit on without crossing its white boundary.

Much of Lynn’s instructional time with her whole class took place in the Reading Corner. She used one wall in the corner to teach the students words they needed to learn on sight. The Word Wall, as she referred to it, was a large bulletin board divided into rectangles, each labeled in the upper left-hand corner with a letter of the alphabet in both the upper and lower cases. Reading from left to right and top to bottom, these letters were in alphabetical order as you looked at the Word Wall. The actual words located on this “Word Wall” were typed in large, black font, printed on white paper and then cut out in the shape of the word. The word was then stapled onto a colored piece of construction paper, cut to be an accenting border of the same shape. These colored borders were used for identification purposes by Lynn when she was trying to teach the students about homonyms. She would ask the students “Do you mean the purple ‘their’ or the orange ‘there’?”
Hung on the walls were various decorations, both handmade and purchased, but all intended for learning and information. For example, a poster underneath the Word Wall said “What’s for Lunch?” with cartoon faces printed on the food items bordering the edges. In the middle of the poster was the school lunch menu for the month. Another example was the large, teacher-made posterboard tooth taped to the wall which tallied the lost teeth of children so far through the school year. There was another handmade poster, titled “Counting Club,” with the days of the week written down the side. Mondays were designated as “ones,” Tuesdays were “twos,” Wednesdays were “fives,” Thursdays were “tens” and Fridays said “down.”

The majority of instructional materials found in Lynn’s classroom were used to support reading achievement. Various materials by Houghton Mifflin Publishing Company were on a shelf near the small reading table where Lynn would do her small group reading instruction. They included cardboard boxes labeled “Phonics Library,” single story books in clear plastic tubs, and hardbound readers. There were many other cardboard boxes with more than one hundred books in them that were sorted by reading level. Some of the books were in their original plastic wrap. There were additional “leveled” books from the publisher Harcourt Brace tucked away on a nearby shelf that were dusty. There were a number of picture dictionaries available for students with publication dates of 1986, 1977, and 1964.

In the front of the classroom was an explanation of Lynn’s classroom management system. A handmade poster hanging on the white board displayed the class
rules. Each rule was written in large, red letters easily visible from the back of the room.

These were the five class rules:

1. Follow the Golden Rule.
2. Let the teacher teach.
3. Follow directions right away.
4. Listen when others talk.
5. Keep hands, feet, and objects to yourself.

Also at the front of the room was the "Behavior Board." This was a pegboard with each student’s name on it. Beside the student’s name was a hook. On each student’s hook were metal tags, each with a different colored paper glued to it. There was a colored poster key at the top of the pegboard. The colors represented the following consequences.

- Green—great job!
- Yellow—warning
- Blue—lose 5 minutes of recess
- Small orange—lose 10 minutes of recess
- White—lose all recesses
- Red—phone or note home, go to office.

Observing Lynn’s classroom environment gave me greater insight into her teaching and management strategies.

Classroom Management

Lynn had the classroom rules and the consequences for breaking those rules posted prominently at the front. In my visitations to the classroom I did not observe her using them as stated with her students. As Lynn has told me several times during this study, this particular year she was experiencing difficulty with managing the behaviors of some of the students in her classroom,
I do think that I have a lot of problem students, and what I mean by that is, kids who have some significant behavioral or emotional issues going on, and I think that, you know, that is a handful—I would say probably five—and I think they are a bad mix together. Some kids whose personalities together are not ideal for a learning environment; kids that may like each other or hate each other or both on any given day, and I think that really does get in the way of instruction in the classroom.

Lynn was frustrated with the amount of time she had to devote to addressing the problems among students, "Lots of squabbling and fighting about things that happened at recess or 'he looked at me' kinds of things or, you know, and it takes twenty minutes away from teaching. . . ."

Acknowledging the combination of "problem" students who are in her room, Lynn also faulted her lack of proper instruction of the rules at the beginning of the school year as another cause of lost academic instruction time:

I think—coupled with the fact that last year was a really good school year for me. . . . that when you start the next school year, you are not as thorough going through things and making sure you model and, you know, over and over, make sure you are very clear, you know, about students knowing everything that you want them to know: how to behave and how the classroom works before you dive right in the academics.

Teacher modeling and instruction was a strong component of Lynn’s belief system for classroom management, and she felt that her failure to devote enough time to it at the beginning of the year resulted in more problems with student behavior. I doubt Lynn’s belief that her problems with students would not have been as pronounced if she had made the rules more clear at the beginning: Her approach to intervening when students were misbehaving was to talk them through the problem if they would cooperate and if not, then deliver a consequence such as missing the next recess or going to the office.
Lynn believed parents should be contacted when their child was having behavior problems in school. To maximize parent communication, Lynn utilized a daily notebook in which she wrote to the parents, sent it home, and hoped they would communicate back with her, “I mean I’ve tried some parent contact. I have some daily notebooks, that daily communication.” She was communicating with two of her students’ parents via the daily notebook during this study. The content of the communication notebooks was a combination of positive and negative comments:

... I try to include both the academics and behaviors... I try really hard to write some positive things, like, ‘I know he has been putting forth lots more effort in reading’ and so I do try to include those things, but also try to be blunt in bullets and list this is what happened, this is what happened, this is what happened. And so the method only works if the parents follow through on their end.

I wondered what her success rate was on parents communicating back and forth with her, and she replied:

Out of the two, one—they don’t write back all the time, but I do know it is read all the time. He, if he’s had a very bad day, in the past has been known to erase or to rip out what I have written and so those parents are very clear that if—is nothing in that notebook? He destroyed it—that I write something in there every day. And I do know that he has nightly consequences. He’s very much—will ask in the middle of the day, he’ll ask how is he doing, ‘am I having an okay day?’ or at the end of the day he’ll say, ‘did you write anything bad?’ But he also knows that if he rips anything up that there are consequences for that, so I know that they do follow up there. Whereas in [another student’s], in the last three nights, I’ve had to highlight. I wrote a question in it three days ago and I’ve had no response whatsoever, so I’ve had to—and there, there’s not much follow up so it doesn’t work well with him because it’s not being followed through on. So I’ve tried just a lot of parent contact.

Lynn believes the parental role is central in helping with the behavior management of some of her students. She also implements her own behavior management system in the classroom, describing it this way, “Well, I have five class rules... I have a behavior chart
with chips and that’s what they lose a chip for, for not following rules.” I asked her to describe in more detail the chip system she was referring to and she replied:

They all start the day on green. It’s just like a little, I don’t know, it’s a chip ring and we all start on green and then if they lose a chip for not following the rules. Let me finish with the rules and I’ll come back. So, follow the golden rule; [listen] when others are talking, keep hands and feet to yourself, let the teacher teach, which is like, if I’m instructing and you are playing with your friend, you are not letting me teach your friend. If you are playing with something at your desk, you are not letting me teach you and that’s not following that rule, so that’s kind of what falls—and we do talk at the beginning of the year what that rule is, but like I said, obviously, maybe not enough. And the last rule is follow directions right away. And so the chip board, if they are not following a rule, then they lose a chip. Then they physically go and take the chip off and put it into a little bucket and then underneath it would be a yellow chip for a warning. If they lose the next chip, underneath would be a blue chip, which would mean they miss five minutes of the last recess. And an orange chip which is ten minutes, underneath that is a white chip which is all of the last recess, and last is red which is a phone call home or to the office...for the most part, if there’s any serious fighting or hitting, I just send them to the office—and we do talk about that. That’s more serious and—something like that, when you are hurting kids—we can’t have you in the classroom doing that.

I asked if this process would require her to replace the chips every day and she clarified:

Yes, in fact, you know, a couple of months into the school year usually someone takes that job upon themselves and they like to put all the chips back. In fact, two of the kids who are on Intensives [referring to intensive instructional plans] they like to put the chips back and, quite frankly, probably because they remember that they need to start on green.

So there were a few students in her room, the ones with some behavior problems, managing the daily logistics of the system. When I asked if I such a system was effective, she replied:

I do think it’s working for some kids. I think there are some kids who it’s not a big deal, but some kids it is to lose one chip. I think kids who lose chips frequently get a little bit immune to it, but otherwise I do think sending notes home or being consistent about taking away the recess time does help. During the recess time I usually talk to them about why they are in or out and what they need to work on.
I did not observe Lynn actually using the chip system. Even when Emma, one of her most noncompliant students, was argumentative and Lynn felt a need to send her to the office, the chip board was not mentioned nor utilized as designed, although she admits one of its functions was to help her be more consistent. As Lynn admits, "I had a hard time being consistent and firm... and so this kind of makes it a lot better about being firm." I suspect Lynn felt her relationships with students was a mixture of kind and caring with somewhat adversarial, depending on their particular problem. By creating this chip board, she rationalized her need to be consistent and firm with all kids, even though it was still difficult for her to do.

Lynn used academic learning as another strategy to manage her students' behavior. She had a list of words on a bulletin board. At recess or lunch, Lynn announced, "Girls and boys, I will point to a word to line up for recess. No raising hands because I am calling on everybody." In no apparent order, she called on each student and pointed to a word in the list. When the student responded correctly, Lynn would say, "very good" and the student would get up and move to the line by the door. The students didn't necessarily line up in the order they were called on. I observed them moving, either to be by someone they liked or to get away from someone they didn't, but they did form a line. To get the students quiet while waiting in the line before they left the classroom, Lynn sang a line to a song that reflected the behavior she wanted and the students sang it back.

Another strategy Lynn used when someone was not paying attention, participating, or looking at her, was to say the offending student’s name. An example of
this would be a time when Lynn addressed the whole class in the Reading Center. She asked them to share their journals, and students would read aloud their writings about their weekends. During this listening time, Colin was whispering to others so Lynn said, "Colin, SH!" and then he quieted down with a frown on his face.

Conversely, calling attention to proper behavior was another strategy Lynn used when she was instructing the whole class. For example, she said, "Lucy is waiting so quietly," and "I like how quiet Pete is sitting." Sometimes Lynn had to stop what she was teaching and address the whole class if more than one or two students were not following along. For example, during a story she was reading to the class, she stopped and said, "Boys and girls, I have lots of people up and about. You need to be on the floor listening to the story." So addressing students individually with positive and corrective comments as well as addressing whole group by drawing attention to what behaviors should be changed were ways in which Lynn explicitly managed her students' behaviors.

Lynn's Professional World

The Building

Lynn spent a great deal of her time in her school building, as she often returned to it weeknights after her daughter went to bed or came back to it on the weekend to try to "get caught up" before another week begins. It is a typical, small town school sitting on a rise in the middle of a neighborhood near the edge of town. I could see the school from the busy state highway before I even got close. It looked like a building sprawled out in different directions, each section covered with stone from a local quarry. The forest-green metal roof seemed to be holding in all the joys and disappointments of the people
contained within it. Flicker Elementary (not the real name) was completely remodeled almost 10 years ago, which more than doubled the size of the school. In the past a person would be able to see students by looking up and down the two hallways with a quick glance. Today there are round convex mirrors and video cameras set up throughout the school so the front office can monitor the activities in the building’s hallways. Lynn had her own key to the building so she was able to come and go any day of the week, any time of the day without permission from anyone.

Flicker Elementary is home to over five hundred students in grades preschool through fifth. There were four or five sections at each grade level and the average class size was 18 students. In addition to the academic classes, students were offered what was typically termed as “special classes” which meant lessons in music, physical education, computer, art, and media, taught by a teacher who specialized in each area. There was also a wide range of other “special services” to accommodate all ability levels of students. These services included: Reading Recovery, a reading program for struggling first grade readers; Title 1, a reading program for struggling readers in grades 2-5; special education classes for students who need support beyond that of the classroom teacher; the Extended Learning Program for students who have been identified as “gifted.”

Flicker Elementary was unique among area elementary schools in that it included the “Stepping Stone Program,” which was described in a brochure as “An Alternative Elementary Program” option for parents of children in grades one through five. In the “Stepping Stone Program” students of different ages work together on a variety of
activities throughout the year and were grouped by age, ability, and/or interest depending on the activity. The curriculum for the “Stepping Stone” students remained the same as that of the other students, but the ordering of units varied between the two programs.

Parents could register for this alternative program and there were only a certain number of slots available. Those who were denied could request their names be put on a waiting list. Lynn didn’t describe the Stepping Stone Program to me as an “alternative program.” Rather she said,

I teach with two others so there are three of us in traditional classrooms and one in—I guess I wouldn’t necessarily call it alternative, but the Stepping Stone Program is a separate multi-age first through fifth grade program—so they are kind of separate. They are in a different part of the building and we don’t have common planning time or anything with that other first grade teacher.

Lynn seemed hesitant to talk further about the Stepping Stone program, and I sensed some tension in her voice when she mentioned it. It also was interesting to me that she did not use the names of the first grade teachers, Ann and her partner, who were in the Stepping Stone program, but rather referred to them as “that other first grade teacher.”

Structurally the building was so large Lynn very rarely had an opportunity to informally converse with the first grade teachers who were teaching in the Stepping Stone program.

Personnel Resources

In addition to the classroom and “specials” teachers, Lynn was supported in her role by her principal, Mrs. East; a part-time assistant principal, Mr. Jay; and two counselors, Mrs. Hamilton, and Mrs. Brown. Lynn also had the resources of personnel from the Western Hills Area Education Agency, which included a school psychologist, a social worker, a speech and language pathologist, an occupational therapist, and an
educational consultant. There were also twenty paraeducators, adults certified as paraeducators but not as teachers, who were employed at Flicker Elementary. The paraeducators’ responsibilities and assignments varied. There were a number of paraeducators who were assigned to special needs students as indicated on their Individualized Education Plan. A number of paraeducators were assigned to the Stepping Stone program and others were assigned in the traditional program. All paraeducators were responsible for supporting student learning under the direction of a certified teacher and were also responsible for recess supervision, lunch supervision, and bus supervision in some capacity. In our conversations, Lynn expressed her gratitude to her principal and the counselors for their help in supporting her with the students. In Lynn’s words, “people truly like our administration, and especially our counselors really support you and help when it’s needed.” Lynn reflected on the different ways she has felt supported by them:

...I’ve gone to them sometimes just to vent. I do feel like they listen and empathize and sometimes sympathize with the situation and that’s just one way. ...I do think specifically they’ve helped with behavior management things. You know, often we are told we need to start a behavior management or behavior modification program and that’s one more thing for a teacher to put on a list of things to do. And so I think one way the counselor is supportive is that instead of me having to put on my list of things to do, then she’ll pull out her file and say, ‘which one of these things do you think will work for you?’ instead of reinventing the wheel.

Lynn had a unique relationship with Mrs. East before she became her principal. Mrs. East was a teacher at Flicker Elementary before she was promoted to the principal position and Lynn was assigned to her for her student teaching. “I actually student taught with her and so I feel I have a really good rapport with her,” Lynn told me as she was
describing the appreciation and support she felt from Mrs. East. Their previous relationship through the student teaching experience was one of trust and respect that carried into the teacher/principal relationship.

Lynn’s close circle of friends were the first grade teachers in her collaboration team.

I think my teammates and I get along really well. I would say we are really good friends in the building. We all have the same types of personalities, and we are not competitive with one another, and we’re just real laid back, and I think we can vent to one another, and we don’t judge one another, you know?

As she mentioned earlier, she didn’t have much contact with the first grade teacher in the Stepping Stone Program. With her colleagues outside of the grade level team she had some challenges. For example, Lynn called a meeting to discuss her concerns with the progress of a student, Colin. In that meeting she advocated for the Reading Recovery teacher to continue to meet with this student even though he had been formally dismissed from the program. Lynn explained the other’s refusal, saying, “Colin’s Reading Recovery teacher didn’t like Colin and they butted heads.” In support of her request Lynn knew of other reading recovery teachers in other districts who followed up on students they had dropped, but that wasn’t the case in Flicker Elementary. Lynn didn’t challenge the principal or the teacher as to a change in practice; rather, she accepted it and moved on.

Building-wide Structural Constraints on Lynn

There are many structures within the school day that Lynn had to contend with as she planned for her students. One structure that dominated Lynn’s own planning was the schedules of others. She was given a schedule at the beginning of the year specifying
when her students would go to different specialized teachers in the areas of art, music, computer lab, media center, and physical education. She also had to consider when certain students would leave her room for additional support from the Reading Recovery teacher, the Title One Reading teacher, the special education teachers, and the speech and language pathologist. In addition to juggling her classroom schedule around these times, she also had to take into account the predetermined recess times, which were fifteen minute breaks each morning and afternoon. Lastly, before she could determine her own classroom schedule, she had to respect the forty minute lunch/recess time she was required to follow.

Furthermore, Lynn’s planning time was scheduled for sixty minutes twice a week with her colleagues and another thirty minutes of required collaboration time on a topic given to her by the principal. Lynn describes her required collaboration time:

That is the focus of, like, our school improvement. One of the focuses in our building was collaboration and it was found to be the number one—something of successful schools or—I’m not having the right phrase or quote, you know. So, they did require it. . . and so we are given weekly topics...This year we just got a new reading series and the collaboration time has been collaborating about our reading series and we just kind of have to document short notes, I suppose as proof that we have done it.

Lynn didn’t verbally articulate her frustration with her required collaboration time but when she gave an example of a required topic for collaboration she voiced this opinion:

For example, one time we were given the mission statement to read and then collaborate or discuss that, you know, so we talk about how we really didn’t agree on part of it and we brought up questions and we write that on our collaboration sheet just to basically prove that we collaborated on that. And that goes to the principal. So as far as like a purpose, we didn’t think, feel, that there was a great—that nothing coming out of those real specific collaboration topics. The vision statement wasn’t going to change because of what we collaborated on, you know, so I mean to me and to us that was just kind of busy work.
So Lynn and her colleagues dutifully fulfilled the task as required by her principal even though there were times she felt it was unproductive. Yet, Lynn was grateful for the collaboration time they were given and felt it was “very beneficial” when they could “sit down and talk” about whatever was on the teachers’ agenda.

Another structure Lynn was required to work with was the Child Assistant Team meetings. When she needed help with a struggling student, she had to wait for the regularly scheduled Child Assistant Team meeting, which was held every other week. In the meantime, Lynn tried as many different strategies as she could think of to help her struggling student. When the student still failed to make progress, Lynn would take the name of the student to the Child Assistance Team. The composition of the team members usually included Lynn, a special education teacher, a counselor, the principal and an area education agency staff member such as a school psychologist, social worker, and/or an educational consultant. Lynn’s view of the purpose of those meetings is described here:

We kind of brainstorm ways to help them, but we start what we call a Supplemental plan, which is something extra in addition to classroom instruction which needs to be done daily and faithfully to try and get that child back to where they need to be. …It could be something I do extra or an associate is doing extra. …The whole entire process is being data driven, you know, figuring out what they know and then administering the Supplemental, the extra help, then plotting data points.

Lynn was describing a very mechanistic process of documenting the additional support she or an associate would give the child. The process consisted of numbers plotted on a graph to determine if the student was progressing as measured by normed academic
probes. If the Supplemental plan did not work for the student, the mandated process continued and was described by Lynn in this way:

So after so long, I know it has to be at least six weeks if not longer, that we do the Supplemental. And if that’s apparently not working, then we would start an Intensive, which is kind of extra help that is not being done by the teacher and is being done by someone else and that’s kind of—I would say, a pull out thing for at least ten minutes, sometimes 15 minutes of one-on-one extra instruction. The teacher is most definitely involved in the planning of what is being done during the Intensive, but we are trying to get creative in the building as far as who is giving them. I mean, last year, I had the Reading Recovery/Title 1 teacher but she was doing my math Intensive for me. She had ten minutes extra so we are trying to pull everybody that is responsible for the education of everyone. Associates have been involved if they have extra ten minutes that they are being required to do those sorts of things, too. And then, as far as the Supplemental and Intensives go, then that again is using data points and plotting them. And after, I know has to be at least six weeks, then we kind of tweak those before we try and use them, try something else, you know, better or more.

The Child Assistance structure, then, was the vehicle to the process of eligibility for special education, one in which Lynn felt she had done all she could do for the student and he or she needed to be moved to someone else.

Specific Students

Colin

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Lynn must utilize the Child Assistant Team structure if she was concerned about one of her students. Lynn decided to bring Colin to the team because he was struggling with reading and Lynn was struggling with his behavior. The day of the team meeting, the school counselor opened the conversation by saying “we have concerns, numerous concerns actually” about Colin. Lynn then proceeded to tell her story about Colin as the rest of the team members listened quietly:

Yes, he is primarily struggling in reading—and lots of things go into play, and we are not really sure. He has some behavior and motivation types of problems,
you know, and he’s really frustrated. And I think as far as effort goes . . . he’s kind of at the point where you can’t keep telling him to try and try harder because he can’t do it and he knows that . . . You know, when he’s taking one of our weekly tests sometimes, and you have to read and fill in the blanks, and they are sight words and word wall words that we have learned all week long that he doesn’t know. And a great example is he put his head on his desk and was crying and said, “I just can’t do it.” You can tell a kid to try harder on that, but if you don’t know the words, trying is not going to help. He’s just really frustrated and so he often, as a coping mechanism, just fills in whatever to get something done. So I guess my biggest concern is he’s just not making a lot of progress in reading. He was in Reading Recovery and was dismissed from that. He does show some growth in his sounds and letters—well, he just, I think gets a little overwhelmed with the task of reading, even though he can read and word by word tried to figure it out. It’s just very labor intensive for him and not easy as you would like it to be. And I think—just knowing sight words—he just doesn’t know a lot of words. It is hard to read.

The Reading Recovery teacher was at the meeting and added to the picture of Colin by saying he “knows a lot of individual skills, but he does not put them together.” Her explanation for that was “he does not want to take the extra effort to put them together.” She talked about him reading a pattern book wonderfully until the pattern changed and then he would not do it. She and Lynn agreed that when Colin got frustrated he also got “owly” and “grumpy.”

Lynn also brought up a story about Colin’s step-mom bringing him to school and “just ranting and raving and yelling at him” and when she left he was “pouty and grumpy.” Lynn was distressed by that scene so she told Colin to come to her. When he didn’t, she went to him and gave him a big hug and he started to cry. Lynn told the team, “I just think he feels beat down and that’s some of the emotional—he’s not feeling successful and then I feel bad for him.”
Knowing that she needed to bring data to the team, Lynn shared the average weekly reading test scores for Colin and compared them to the class as a whole. She said,

First quarter his average was 67 percent, the class average was 77 percent. Second quarter his average again was 66 percent and the class average was 77 percent. Third quarter so far, his average is 52 percent so I feel like it’s getting harder. His weekly word wall words scores, which at the end of every week I try to check on 6 to 7 words: First quarter his weekly average was 49 percent and the class average was 81 percent and that’s just his weekly test scores. For the entire, all the words through the first semester, he only knew 47 percent of the words and the class knew 83 percent.

The Reading Recovery teacher mentioned his inability to retain words, but Lynn was fairly quick to disagree. She noted that if he practiced them he could learn them but he wasn’t getting the practice he needed from home.

The team conversed about the idea of Colin having attention problems, but Lynn disagreed. They did focus on Colin’s need for attention and suggested maybe the counselors should see him. Lynn didn’t disagree with that, but she was pressing for answers to his academic problems, “Okay, so what do we do about the academics?” She stressed his need to “work on words” and if he “knew more sight words he would be more successful on our tests.” Lynn really wanted someone to help this child with his sight words and knew he wasn’t getting any practice on them at home. The Title 1 teacher offered to work on them when he came for instruction from her, the counselor offered to call Grandma and see if she would help him, and the principal suggested they put him on an Intensive plan, which meant an associate would be able to help him with his sight words. The intensive instruction Colin would receive to improve his reading scores was practice with his sight words. It was decided at the meeting that an associate
would be executing the Intensive plan with Lynn making flash cards and games for her to use. The school psychologist was going to monitor his progress, and the team would reconvene in six weeks. These were the solutions the team devised for Colin’s struggles in school.

During my observations of Lynn’s classroom, I was not able to observe Colin working on his sight words. I did, however, observe Colin’s behavior. For example, there was a time when Lynn was giving Colin his spelling test and, while doing so, she needed to address another student’s behavior. When that happened, Colin pounded his fist on his desk and said to a neighboring student, “I am doing my spelling test.” Another girl in the class had a very “pouty” look on her face and kicked her desk. That diverted Lynn’s attention away from Colin once again. This time Lynn left the room to take the girl to the office because she wasn’t working and was disruptive. In Lynn’s absence, Colin got up from his desk and wandered, in a slightly deliberate yet not overt way, over to the teacher’s desk to find a piece of candy to eat. He looked directly at me and smiled. He then moved from the teacher’s desk to other students’ desks, swinging between two each time he moved down the aisle, and then left the room to go to the bathroom.

When Lynn returned from taking her student to the office, she went to the Reading Center and began reading a book to some of the students. Students slowly meandered over to the Reading Center to listen to the story. As far as I could determine, Colin’s spelling test was left half finished, and I do not know if they finished it later in the day.
Six weeks later, the team did reconvene and I was invited to attend as a follow-up to the initial discussion. Lynn reported to the Child Assistant Team members that Colin had been working with an associate, Tina, and that it had been going really well. She reported:

He is eager to go with her and I think he enjoys it. I do think, you know, they have been working on sight words and then the ones he missed before. So I kind of gave her both things to do. I tried to give him flash cards, I kind of gave her some creative, you know, to play around a bit. I do know they play a game or two at the end... I tried to get him to write the word in the sentence. I try to use other high frequency sentences, just to make him be reading. Um, like I said, he seems to be enjoying going. I do think, as far as progress, I have seen, um, his weekly word wall words have gone up since we started this, like he’s um, he’s gotten one hundred several weeks or... he just missed one. He knows them pretty fast. Doesn’t need to struggle with or sound them out, I mean he just is like a child that has practiced and knows his words, um, and that has gone up.

Lynn reported some specific data on his word wall tests, and then moved into the application of this knowledge to his actual reading. She was disappointed in those results:

As far as the whole purpose we were doing this, we were hoping that if he knew more words, that his reading level would go up and then, in turn, his test scores would go up. I haven’t so much seen a transfer over to his weekly test go, they are still pretty, um, 46 percent, 63 percent. He did have a week with 80 percent, 52 percent, but this is below the 80 percent criterion we are looking for. I do think he is capable of reading. I think still, so much of his weekly test is his attitude. I know this past Friday, he, you know, I pulled him over, and he was, and I was just pointing and making him read, and he is totally able to read the words, but he is just grumpy and he doesn’t want to sit and read it with me. Because he doesn’t want to read it. You know, the minute I turn to help somebody else, he fills in three more circles. And I know he didn’t read those because he can’t read that fast. He is really resistant and grumpy about reading things to me. Even though I keep telling him, you know, where before he couldn’t read it, still it is very frustrating to me that he [doesn’t read the tests].

The Title 1 teacher, Karen, reported her experiences with Colin as he came to her on a daily basis for supplemental reading instruction. She had him read a book from a
Reading Recovery packet which was a level 12, "that would be about a primer, I suppose" she translated for the group. Karen summarized that Colin read a level twelve passage with ninety-four percent accuracy and he "self-corrected half the time." She didn’t believe he could have read the next level, 14, so she asked him, "Real quick, what are the hardest things for you to take in school?" She didn’t ask him what was the hardest thing about reading, but rather, the hardest things to "take" in school. She reported it didn’t take Colin long to say when he has to “read those stories on a page” and “reading paper tests and then fill in the circles.” Karen pursued a bit more into Colin’s thoughts and discovered when he turned a page the story, “just goes on.” So, she suggested to Colin and the team, that he take a piece of construction paper or something and uncover the story line by line. She said to the team, “I don’t know if it is worth trying or not but maybe it would be a little crutch to make him make it work.” Then she acquiesced to an idea Lynn had prior to the meeting, “but then you [Lynn] have your idea for tweaking this maybe.”

It turned out Lynn did have an idea about how to “tweak” the Intensive plan to see if it would yield better results for Colin. She explained:

I would like . . . that the change be that they would just go through some old tests, do you know what I mean, to kind of get him to see that he is quite capable of reading them to get him to read them independent doing his weekly tests. And I do think, you know, during his weekly test I am like kind of open to how can I adapt it. You know, I think he is just a child that just gets so overwhelmed by, I don’t know, he is the kind of kid that when you read, like he likes to know how many pages there are, you know, he is very fixated.
Lynn said she was “open to how I adapt” the tests for Colin but she struggled with knowing exactly how to do that because she tried to do it earlier in the year. As she reported:

In the beginning I tried to adjust Colin’s [assessment], but then I have the problem where I have kids who are sitting for fifteen minutes waiting for a child who is just on what. I have so many attention problems in my room. Then that is not fair. I really feel like it has turned into, you know, most kids are done in twenty-five minutes and I’ve got seven kids who take them a lot longer. So I have been just trying different things to get it done. You know, Colin, I’ll have him sit right next to me and read different parts to me, you know, and then I’ll have others trying on their own. I have been slowly picking away and trying to get those kids to try on their own.

It wasn’t just Colin who was slow in processing the test, but Colin got attention from Lynn as a result of his reaction to the testing situation. Lynn described him this way:

I will say he gets really frustrated when others get done because he is thinking—when he has done three, he [the other student] has done the whole test... He whines and moans and is yelling at the other kids because surely they didn’t read, and you know so...

A discussion ensued over the worthiness of attempting to test Colin in a different way from others, such as recess time, but nothing solid was ever decided. The team concluded that focusing on sight words was a help to Colin, and they would continue with the associate supporting him with that as well as practicing with “old” reading tests.

He was not eligible for special education, based on his success with the sight words, and in Lynn’s words, “I didn’t have a preconceived notion that he would qualify [for special education] or even intended him—I just think he needs a little bit of extra help.”
Emma

Emma was a very slender first grader of average height who wore clothes that were semi-clean but indicated she might be from a lower social economic level family. Her hair was a “mousy” brown and fell just below her chin line in uneven lengths. Because of her disruptive behavior, she had been a source of frustration for Lynn since Thanksgiving. It was March and Lynn finally decided to bring Emma’s name up to the Child Assistance Team for some help and guidance with her behavior.

The team meeting started with a discussion about what to do with all the discipline referrals Emma had accumulated over the past months, currently being issued on a daily basis. The principal said to the team:

I don’t know if we want to send home the ones [referrals] that were past, but we need to make a decision about whether, from now on, we want to send home the ones in the future. I don’t know—I think the past is past and we don’t want to do anything with that. I think that could be overwhelming to see all those come home at one time and not help the situation, so maybe from now on we want to see that those get home.

Apparently, the discipline referrals had accumulated in the office and the principal was advocating for a change in process. Sending them home as Emma received them seemed to make more sense to her. The school psychologist thought it was a good idea, but the school counselor was skeptical, “We need to kind of figure out something with mom and dad though ‘cause my guess is that they won’t get home.” Lynn agreed with the counselor, “that’s what I was thinking too, like, do we mail them home or what?” Then she added, “‘Cause I’ve had no luck calling them, mailing it, anything like this, I’ve never gotten a response from anything.” The principal considered Lynn’s experience with Emma’s family and said, “We may need to just figure out a process to do that and
that might even mean just leaving a message on mom’s cell phone that there is a note coming home.” Lynn and other team member questioned whether or not Emma would even take the discipline referrals home. The principal had an answer for that:

Maybe what we—just thinking that through—that, maybe the first thing we want to do is to start off by saying, please sign and return, and then if they don’t come back we go to the second part and put on their yellow sheet please sign and return so we know you’ve gotten this information and if they don’t come back, that’s when we can start to make the call. I just feel a little better about that.

The team considered this process as a logical next step and then moved to a discussion about Emma’s behaviors. The school psychologist wanted to hear about the “triggers” which set Emma off. Lynn offered this by way of explanation:

Well, she started off the year really blending in well with her peers and didn’t seem to stick out at all and as the year has progressed, primarily—like I would say Thanksgiving time, like as the holidays got closer she just couldn’t handle any kind of disappointments or not getting her way very well . . . A big trigger is, if she doesn’t pass a test in Rocket Math or doesn’t get 100 on her spelling test and doesn’t get her Snickers, that is a weekly, almost a guarantee that—and when she gets upset she pouts, she cries, and then she starts yelling at other kids to stop looking at her and then she basically kinda shuts down and she has a really hard time getting out of that.

Lynn continued after an “okay” from the school psychologist:

And she becomes really disruptive and it’s nearly impossible to continue to have class while she’s still in the room, but also then eventually she comes down off of that and then she’s fine. When she kind of gets in these moods and having a temper tantrum she’s really like a different child. I mean, like I said, she gives you nasty facial expressions and she’s yelling at other kids and she shuts down and refuses to do anything, but then when she’s not like that, she’s eager to please and in a really good mood and “I’m going to try really hard” and I’m trying to think of—she does set up like, particular peers, I mean there is another child or two in particular that really know exactly which buttons to push and they push them and she does the exact same thing to them. I mean it’s not all one-sided.
The team talked about this behavior, which was isolating Emma from others causing "friendship issues" because kids were "starting to get scared of her."

Lynn had Emma on a Supplemental plan, which she described as "really primitive." She was charting the behaviors which caused Emma to leave the classroom and go to the office. The counselor had met with Emma and discussed her "pouty" faces and her crying and yelling which were the behaviors Lynn was tallying in a chart for frequency. While this discussion was occurring, the social worker had been reviewing the pile of discipline referrals still laying on the table from the beginning of the meeting. She commented to the team that she noticed most of the offenses happened in the morning and therefore asked the question—"what is going on in the classroom during that time?"

The team didn’t directly address the question, but the principal made the comment that Emma had been coming up to the office first thing in the morning frequently, but once Emma had been to her Title 1 reading class and then to her Reading Recovery class, "it was almost like once you got her that far and she got that individual attention she could handle that and then we didn’t see her a whole lot the rest of the day." Lynn agreed she was able to tell what kind of day Emma was going to have as soon as she walked in the door by "her demeanor and what she does for the first couple of minutes." Lynn summarized by saying that Emma does do better when she gets that attention, "I mean I think she is starving for attention, one-on-one. . ."

The school psychologist also brought up the question, "Have you seen a difference in behaviors in the past week or two weeks? There have been a lot of family
changes and I’m not sure if that is impacting how she gets to school.” Lynn noted she did think Emma was well aware of the situation with her sister [who was sent to another school because of her behavior] and that Emma made comments such as “if she gets into trouble or she’s going to have to go away,” so Lynn felt the family changes clearly bothered Emma.

The school social worker changed the focus of the discussion away from the family as an explanation for Emma’s behavior by asking the question, “Lynn, have you seen a pattern or one or two things that set her off besides just not having her way?” Lynn replied:

Well, if she gets into trouble sometimes, like, then that makes her mad. If she has to lose a chip or something. Not always, some days she’s fine but often if she’s upset because she had to lose a chip then she gets mad.

The principal points out that Emma often believes it is not her fault when she gets in trouble. Lynn supports that statement:

Particularly if she gets in trouble... if she is sitting next to a particular child or two, like, and she had to lose a chip then there’s a problem. Like yesterday, a specific example just to describe, she got into trouble because she was taunting another child because he had gotten into trouble but she was teasing him about it. Real sneaky, you know, I didn’t hear it but I knew something was going on, you know, and then she got in trouble and had to lose a chip because of it and then when I was talking to her she was plugging her ears, ‘I’m not listening to you’ and then she just—it escalates very fast. Like a switch.

Trying to find a cause for this behavior the counselor offered that it “might be learned behavior from her sister.” It seemed Emma and her sister had some of the same behavioral characteristics. The principal reflected, “Both of them have their facial expressions when they get upset to the point where they look alike.” Lynn joined in,
“They both get real mad physically in the face.” Lynn continued describing how Emma and her sister were alike:

Like holding their breath, making their faces red. The sad part... obviously that is some of what she has learned, but then like you said, one is on the opposite side of the building getting into trouble for the exact same thing the other one, you know, that part is eerie.

The social worker listened to this description and then wondered if there was any way to see it and “head off” the behavior. Lynn responded:

Then it opens a whole other can of worms sometimes, you know what I mean? When I can see it coming—like the spelling test thing. I’m not willing to budge on that. You don’t get a Snickers unless you get 100 on your test. You know, little things like that... If I give into her on that...

The counselor responded by saying Emma’s mom was upset about that but she told the mom, “The moral of the story is that Emma has to learn that she has got to study those words at home because she is very, very capable of getting 100 percent.”

This line of thinking led the team into coming up with solutions about how to control Emma’s behavior, moving away from discussing the causes. Ideas such as finding a place for her to get “calmed down” without making her mad or asking her to go to the nurse’s office or do some work before she gets mad. Lynn thought the idea of going to the nurse’s office just might work for Emma:

... I mean, if she would rather go to the nurse’s office to do something like that for a little while and calm down—I feel like if I don’t say ‘you need to go so you can calm down’, if it was something else then she might be okay, if I told her she needed to go. I don’t know. I’ll have to think about what she could do...

Eventually the team moved toward considering Emma’s academic progress. Lynn stated, “as far as her academics go, I think she is behind.” The counselor looked at Emma’s scores on the *Iowa Test of Basic Skills* and reported:
Her core was a 1.2 and should have been 1.5. She was in the 34th percentile but she was in the 30's and 40's all the way through. Percentile wise. But what we know about her, one would have expected her to be much higher than that. And her pre-reading test in kindergarten she was 87 percent[sic]. I mean she should be more in those percentiles than in the 30's.

Lynn believed Emma could do better if she got some individual support:

I feel like she is with it or has enough going on that she should be at reading level and know things. In addition to classroom [instruction], she just needs five or ten minutes of help a day, you know what I mean? One-on-one which would really make sure she’s getting it.”

This led the principal to ask:

I’m going to ask a question here because we are thinking about doing an Intensive [Plan] and this is... We were thinking of doing Intensive [with a goal for] behavior, but thinking about this—Would... even ten minutes a day Intensive [directed toward] academics [be enough] to help the behavior? And that sounds like a weird way to come at it.

She continued explaining her rationale after Lynn and others agreed with her:

To me it would seem like even if we had somebody to go through her sight words and went through her spelling words for ten minutes a day, it sounds like it’s an academic one [Intensive plan] but maybe by doing that we wouldn’t have the behavior because she would be getting attention. And plus she might get her Snickers, plus she would earn her Snickers, it wouldn’t be given to her, she would actually earn it, but she would also get the attention and those types of things too. Now saying that, I also think we have to think about what supports we will give her for behavior. So maybe it is a dual Intensive type of thing.

The attention Emma would be getting through an Intensive plan which focused on spelling words or sight words appealed to Lynn even though academics wasn’t her major concern:

Quite honestly, her spelling scores aren’t really that low. She might miss one or two and the same thing with the word walls, but I agree with you. I do think that she’s already getting Reading Recovery, but I do think she is the type of child who is going to benefit.
The school psychologist, who was mainly responsible for the progress monitoring of goal acquisition on any Intensive plan, wanted to clarify that the team was not trying to claim Emma’s entitlement for special education; what I’m hearing is that the reason there are academic concerns is because the behaviors are getting in the way. It’s not so much that, like kindergarten performance, which we think there’s a deficit or [dis]ability, and so I guess, to me it’s not like—some kids we’ve written Intensives and we are wondering, oh gosh, maybe—are they eligible? I’m not hearing that we have that question in the back of our minds for this academic stuff so we don’t need that data.

The principal didn’t want to cross off the possibility that Emma might be eligible for special education on the basis of behavior so she asked about the process:

Does she follow the same path when she could be eligible for special instruction or entitlement—but not based on academics, but based on behavior? Now that’s not to say that’s the pattern we want her to follow. Definitely we are trying to avoid that and get somewhere else.

Lynn emphasized, “We really need to try to do the behavior data and not the academic data.”

The team deliberated over the goal of the Intensive plan and also when it would be implemented. Never quite deciding on a specific targeted goal, the team turned the discussion toward when Emma would be available for intensive instruction. This allowed them to focus on who would deliver that instruction. As the principal stated, “We also need to figure out when to do these Intensives. And there again, I was thinking that would be good first thing in the day, but I don’t know if we have anyone available at that time.” The team explored various times of the morning but found no one was available when Emma wasn’t already scheduled for something else. Finally, the principal said she would work on finding someone at the “12:30 time.”
After the “who” and the “when” were decided, the social worker asked, “what would we be progress monitoring in the classroom?” Because Emma was frequently removed from the classroom for yelling, it was decided her goal would be to decrease that particular behavior. How that might look for progress monitoring was debated. The team finally settled on “dividing her day into four [segments], with natural breaks of recess and lunch” and trying to set up the chart with statements about what Emma should learn to do. The school psychologist said it this way, “We did little pictures on the side. To say in class I use my indoor voice, don’t disrupt others. It should be positively stated.” The members of the team didn’t agree or disagree with this idea. It was left unanswered because time ran out and teachers needed to get back to their students.

Refinements of the team’s ideas were held after the meeting with the appropriate people. By the end of this post-meeting discussion, it was clear that Emma’s removals from class for disruptive behavior would be recorded for each of those four segments. A successful segment would be one with no removals.

A follow-up meeting about Emma was held six weeks later. The purpose of the meeting was to assess the effectiveness of the intervention. The “intervention” was a combination of academic work and attention with an paraprofessional. The school psychologist, counselor, and Emma also met for behavior discussions during those six weeks. The specific goal was for her to remain in the classroom 100 percent of the day. Lynn was the first to report her feelings about how things were going with Emma:

I think that initially, when we started this, things were not going well. I mean, she was in the office almost on a daily basis, um, sometimes more than once. I think things slowly seemed to have calmed down, but she still does, um—I know that last week she was in the office. I felt like she hadn’t been in the office for awhile
and hasn’t been as disruptive and kind of seemed to have been rather calm, you
know, where she wasn’t having the explosive type of things in the classroom
where she needed to leave. And then, um, just when I was thinking things were
settling down, I felt like I had a few days, where you know it was very back to
square one where she would just upset.

Then Lynn reported on her evidence-based data:

It seems like actually, when I look at just my chart, she might go like, one, two,
three days and then four days, the most she has gone without, so I guess that’s
not, we’re not having to leave. Three, four days is the most she has gone without
[leaving the classroom].

The school psychologist had taken Lynn’s charts and put the data on a graph:

Speaking of your charts, the data collection. It does seem like slowly but surely
she is spending more time in the classroom. Um, there are a lot of days she is not,
or she has to leave for whatever portion it is before she has to come back.

The team examined the graph and Lynn questioned her own interpretation, “so the aim
line is what we are supposed to be shooting for right?” The psychologist confirmed and
Lynn pursued further, “okay so just a couple of days she is below that, right?” Again the
psychologist confirmed with a qualifier, “right, that is one way to look at it.” Lynn was
not happy with the results she saw in the graph, relative to her perception:

Which to me, fifty percent, for while there, if the aim line is only fifty percent to
me that is, I mean, if you are out of there twice a day, that is kind of a really bad
day you know? So I think that is really bad. Even the one—I do think the
academic part we are doing, I do think that, I haven’t had arguments, or she hasn’t
got upset and worked up because of something academic like, you know, for
spelling. I am not saying she doesn’t get upset once in awhile, but . . . she does
handle that better, but I do think we have eliminated a lot of problems too. She
has been more successful in Rocket Math so that is not an issue. And everything
with spelling, um, in addition the extra attention, she really knows exactly when
she is supposed to come and tell me. When Mrs. Sands [the paraprofessional] was
absent for a few days, she very well was affected by that . . . and when Miss Jones,
the Reading Recovery teacher is gone, I mean, she is like, ‘where is she?’, you
know. I did notice that on Friday, Jane [Jones] was gone and she left a note on
Thursday night saying, still lots of the same things upset her and what you know,
um, um, often the other student, Mark, we were talking about, you know, um,
things like calling her baby, she gets upset, they start fighting or somebody is
tattling on her for something for her. Before they can even speak, she is upset and
crying and that ‘he is lying’ and ‘he is trying to get me in trouble’ and that is not
necessarily only with Mark, it could be with any child she doesn’t necessarily
have trouble with or fears, you know? . . . She has chosen, on one afternoon, I
know she was upset, came in after lunch and—she was upset after recess, excuse
me—but she asked if she could go up to the office to cool off. I said yes that she
could. I do know, probably, if she hadn’t that other ten-fifteen minutes she
probably would have been sent out of the room. I thought that was good that she
knew that she just needed to go.

The principal acknowledged that, “even when she [Emma] comes to the office she wants
attention. She seeks that attention.” The principal also noted that when Emma did come
to the office, “she can hang on to herself better and it still takes work, but it’s not nearly
what it was.”

Lynn shared with the team her conversations with Emma which demonstrated
Emma was learning to control her behaviors:

And she’ll say, ‘when we talk about taking deep breaths and some of these things
that we talk about, you know, talking it out, what we have practiced.’ Oh yeah,
you can do that now, so let’s just try and do that. And she is one to verbalize, she
says, ‘oh I talked it out’ and . . . she says to me one day, ‘I need to breathe and
rewind.’

Lynn also noted that if Emma could hold on to a stuffed animal it seemed to help her with
her emotions:

Even if we just have a stuffed animal or something, like in the corner by your
couch, but she does like to hold on to something, like that kind of emotional, just
to hold on. . . It does really help her. I know that is something we have tried in
the room with the other kids, but that is something she really likes, and I do think
that it does help her.

The counselor did have a few stuffed animals by the couch in the waiting room outside
her office. The principal confirmed that Emma was attracted by those: “One day she
came and helped herself and I did take it away from her that day. I said, no, you just
can’t go and take it, you have to ask for it.” The counselor was going to suggest Lynn
take one down to her room for Emma, then changed her mind: “What if I gave, no, it
would cause too much trouble in her room.” Lynn agreed, but she did suggest that Emma
could come to the couch to cool off: “I am saying, if she comes, if she says again, “can I
go cool off,’ there may be, I will just tell her that she just needs to go to the couch.” The
principal reflected, “That might make a difference. If she’s at the couch to cool off,
rather than up in the timeout room, that [the timeout room] is more the naughty place.”

Lynn questioned whether she should continue with the Intensive plan and the
psychologist said, “at this point [April] I think I would like to just finish the year with it.’
Her rationale for doing so was, “just kinda hate to take stuff away when I, when it is
having a positive impact.” But Lynn wondered about the goal, “Okay. So like, as far—
when you talk about kids meeting goals, she hasn’t done that though. Right or what?”

The psychologist explained,

Well, I set her goal. No, she hasn’t met her goal, yet, that would be 100 percent of
the time in the room. I think that I chose a data point [perhaps target date] was
six to nine weeks out, and I know that we are charting everyday, but we can’t
expect the behaviors to go away in one day.

Lynn accepted that explanation but wondered about next year:

So I was just curious, even as far as next year, because I think she started out the
year, I didn’t have trouble with her until late fall. I mean I didn’t have any idea
that she had any emotional temper problems at all. And so I am just feeling like it
might be nice if next year when she knows she starts the year out that she will
probably be fine for awhile, it would be nice if she got some of that individual
attention, ahead of time, more proactive, rather than reactive.

The counselor and the principal agreed that the teacher next year should be prepared and
that the Intensive plan should continue for Emma because it did “three things” for her:
“It gives her time away from other kids, which then can be a little calming time, and give her individual attention which she seems to have to have.” The psychologist suggested she and the counselor continue to try and meet with Emma a couple of times a week “to do little stories with her and stuff” and asked the team if there was anything “helpful that you want us to target?” The counselor shared with the team they had already talked to Emma about “smiling” and how they “did the nice and polite book” so that “we have the words that we practice.”

This led Lynn into another concern for Emma, her peer relationships. She didn’t think Emma knew “how to be friends” or that she “chooses friends wisely.” Lynn explained:

She tends to gravitate toward those kids that, you know, if I could pick somebody she happened to be friends, you know, it’s not necessarily, you know what I mean? Like kids that I would, that would be good influences on her, those aren’t necessarily the kids that she spends time with. And so that’s—I don’t know how to teach that skill to a first grader.

The counselor confirmed the friendship problems, “And nobody likes her. Which I am sure they don’t because she knows she is an explosive bomb you know. That is not who kids who are okay gravitate to either.” While the friendship concerns for Emma were expressed, no decision to do anything about them was made. Lynn wanted to know if the team was going to “actually meet again on her before the year is over?” The principal didn’t think that was necessary and the counselor confirmed they were “going to keep the Intensive going through next year.” The counselor ended the team meeting by saying,

Lynn, that is nice news isn’t it? Doesn’t that feel better? It would be nice to get her so she wasn’t doing this next year wouldn’t it? If we could get that worked out so that—course, don’t we always [hope for that]?
CHAPTER 5

ANN

My First Encounter

I was more confident and eager as I approached my first interview with Ann. Having enjoyed the experience I had with Lynn the night preceding Ann's interview, I felt this interview would go reasonably well. I knew how to manipulate my tape recorder so I could change tapes easily; I had some experience with knowing when to ask probing questions when answers weren't complete or when they caused me to question a topic I hadn't anticipated; and I knew I could relax and find a more conversational tone with my participant, which was my goal. When I contacted Ann to set up an interview, I found her to be purposefully energetic with a "no time to waste" attitude. Her shoulder length blonde hair and slim body suggested Ann was in control of not only her classroom, but also other aspects of her life.

At Ann's request, I met her at Flicker Elementary, the same school where Lynn taught. Ann was a part-time first grade teacher and her day with students concluded at noon although she usually stayed to eat hot lunch. Her own son was with a sitter in the morning while she taught, and he needed to be picked up by 1:00 pm. Knowing Ann was on a fairly tight schedule created a tension in my approach to this interview. I wanted to build some rapport with her, yet I knew I had only so much time to find out about Ann's professional life.

The setting for our first interview was the counselor's office because it was the only space Ann could find that wasn't being used by anyone at the time. Ann brought her
hot lunch to eat while I interviewed her, but she ate very little while we talked. After closing the door, we sat together at a round table and I began with my questions. I was surprised at how business-like we both acted. I didn’t feel like we ever broke that interviewer/interviewee relationship in the three interviews I was able to conduct with her. Perhaps the settings, which were always held at the school during the noon hour, the limited number of interviews, and the lack of informal contact contributed to my feeling that I couldn’t get beyond our formal relationship. Being acutely aware of Ann’s need to control her time and her unstated reluctance to give whatever I needed for this interview, I didn’t push for another venue in an attempt to break down the barrier of formality. I was grateful for the time she did give me.

**A Brief Insight into Ann’s History**

All of Ann’s teaching career in a public school, ten years total, had been at Flicker Elementary in the first grade classroom. While pursuing her Bachelor of Arts degree in education at a state university, she also worked in a “daycare/preschool situation.” When she completed her degree, she worked for a year at a HeadStart Preschool. There she “worked with some kids with different needs and worked with different caseworkers and things like that, trying to help those kids.” Following her year at HeadStart, she accepted a part time first grade position at Flicker Elementary. Her initial teaching partner was also the part-time assistant principal, who later became a full time associate principal, and currently, during this study, the full time principal.

Her college preparation for working with special needs students was somewhat limited, as she recalled:
I wouldn’t say there were a lot of courses I took. My BA is elementary and early childhood—a double major. I can’t remember the name of the course. I did have one professor that was very good about just talking about different needs of kids and how to meet the different needs of kids, but I don’t think there was ever a course specifically for how to teach special ed children.

She enjoyed her college experiences and felt that she had one teacher whom she really liked. The reason she liked him so much was stated this way:

He just really made us think. He never gave us a for sure answer. It was just, it was so, get into your own brain and figure this out. And you, I struggled with it, and it was one of the hardest classes I ever took, but I learned so much about myself and about what I wanted to do through that teacher.

Ann’s high school experiences were memories of teachers who would “just stand and lecture all the time and there is not a lot of interaction back and forth with the kids.” She felt those teachers were some of the worst teachers she had because they were “just standing and imparting their knowledge on you.” While there were not many of this type of teacher in her high school career, “probably one out of the six every semester you are going to have somebody just stand up there and lecture to you.” Those who did made an unfavorable impression.

Contrasting her high school experience with her elementary experience, Ann painted a different picture. One teacher in particular she remembered fondly:

I had a teacher that I remember the most, just because of her loving and caring. She just cared about the children. And I also remember doing lots of hands on things. Like I remember exploding volcanoes and things like that where we got to just kind of get our hands dirty and get in there.

I assumed Ann enjoyed that particular teacher because she learns best with “hands on and just be able to get in there and do it and try it for myself with guidance.” The guidance part was important to her as she stated:
They just kind of let you go and if you don’t quite understand it, it’s hard to get there without a little guidance with the teacher coming and giving some little bit of help to kind of get you there.

The other elementary experience Ann recalled was not of her teachers, but of a special education classroom.

The only thing I remember about special ed kids is that it was more of a level 2 classroom and that certain kids got to go down and help out in the classroom. So we would go down and we were older kids and we would help with playing games and things like that. They were not included in our classroom but we were included in their classroom and did different activities with them. I remember being chosen to do that.

She explained further, “You got to go down for twenty minutes every once in a while and do different activities and they would have songs and stuff to do with the kids and stuff like that.”

I inquired if she made any friends with students who had special needs and she did remember her parents as having very good friends who had a daughter with Down’s Syndrome. Ann thought this girl, whom she didn’t name, was four or five years younger than she. She remembered:

But knowing how that worked at first, not being able to walk and talk and just the difference between her and I, but we spent a lot of time at their house and stuff and just kind of grew up with that.

I probed a bit further to see if Ann and this girl were actually friends and she said:

She was young enough and we moved when I was done with elementary school so we moved away from that family so it wasn’t hanging out friends because she was four or five years younger than I was, but we were together when our families were together.
I wondered if Ann's loving and caring elementary teacher or her experiences with helping children with special needs had influenced her career choice, but that was not the case according to Ann:

I would say, I have always known I was going to be a teacher. I love children. And it has always been easy for me to be around kids whether I was—I mean when I was in high school, I taught Sunday School and volunteered at the girls' home and things like that. I always had a connection with younger children and I always knew it was going to be younger children, not high school or middle school.

When Ann was younger and out of school, she and her best friend "played school." "I had a best friend that actually had a chalkboard and desks in her house and that was the most fun ever. So we would play school for hours." Ann and her friend shared the responsibility of being the teacher but as Ann admitted, "I like to be in charge too. I like to be the teacher." So Ann's days while not in school, were filled with replicating school-like behavior with her best friend.

Ann's Beliefs about Teaching and Learning

Ann's beliefs about teaching were embedded in her response to my question about the inclusion of her special needs students, as she had "kids who have severe autism, Down Syndrome, who are all at different skills." She advocated for inclusion if it was appropriate for the student. I interpreted Ann's use of the word "appropriate" to mean she would include the students if they could glean something important from what she was teaching in her classroom. She didn't want them to "waste time" in her room if they could be learning more at "their level" in the special education room. Ann expressed the benefits of inclusion through her own daughter's experience:
My daughter is in a second grade classroom right now and she has a severely autistic child in there and the Down’s Syndrome child in there, and I’m so proud of what they have done with the kids and how loving and accepting they are and how much the special ed kids have learned from the general education kids. They accept them. Kids are so much more accepting than adults are and so they accept them as part of their class completely.

Ann’s advocacy for inclusion, expressed in such meaningful terms above, did not however extend to her own classroom. Without an apparent sense of contradiction, Ann explained that if she had to abridge the curriculum so drastically for a student to succeed, then it would be more appropriate for a child to receive his or her education separate from the others. She explained it this way:

It comes to when I’m teaching and even if I’ve adapted it so far past where that child is, then I feel like that’s when the child should be pulled out for that amount of time to get the skills that they really need to get, instead of trying to always bring the lesson down to them because that’s a lot of time not appropriate. It’s not what they need. They need to fill this foundation that’s a little farther before they can ever be to the place that you are at. If you are going to jump to that place, they are never going to build that foundation at the bottom to get to where that class is at.

Ann shared that in the first thirty-five minutes special needs students were included in her reading class, listening to poems and songs, things that “I think they are gaining from.” When she got to the skill work, such as “phonics and things,” she had the children leave, because the phonics she taught was so beyond the capabilities of her special needs students that, as she put it, “I just don’t think it would be good for their time for them to sit and listen to me teaching that.” The students did return for the end of reading class where they are able to go to independent-learning centers because, in Ann’s words, “I feel they can do that and they can come back and they’re with the kids during centers
time.” The special education teacher and Ann worked very closely on content and scheduling of the students.

Ann’s willingness to allow special needs students in her room was dependent upon what she needed to do to prepare for them. Inclusion was allowed for activities that didn’t require extra planning by Ann, such as listening to a story or a poem, singing all together, or participating in the independent centers for listening or writing. At first it appeared Ann’s rationale for separate placement and “inclusion when appropriate” centered on her perceived ability to meet the students’ academic “needs,” but when examined more deeply what emerged was that it met Ann’s need to separate. On the one hand, she celebrated the benefits her daughter experienced from special needs students in her classroom, yet on the other hand, in Ann’s classroom, special needs students who were sufficiently below what she was teaching were better served, in her mind, in the special education classrooms.

Students were moved in and out of mathematics class just as they were for reading, based on Ann’s opinion of their ability to handle the material she was teaching. As she described it:

Whatever I think they can handle, they stay in there for it and it can change sometimes daily, weekly, a lot of times. Mainly we have a schedule and I make it so that [this] chunk is for them and that chunk is not for them.

Interestingly, science, social studies and writing were subject areas where “kids are totally included.” Her “writing block” was an area where she particularly emphasized the inclusion of her special education students. As she explained it, “it’s a Writers’ Workshop format so kids can be at whatever level they need to be at.” It was interesting
to note that Ann implemented a Writer’s Workshop format because it allowed students
the freedom to write at their own levels of ability, yet this freedom didn’t translate to one
of the students she referred into the special education process.

In an attempt to understand Ann’s teaching approach to students with disabilities,
I wanted to find out what came to her mind when she heard about a child who would be
on her class roster and was already diagnosed with a disability. This is what she said:

I would say just something that, as a child, it holds the child back. A little, you
know, it makes it, that child has to work just that much harder to get where
society expects them to be.

I wondered, as a first grade teacher, if she ever had to tell parents their child had a
disability. She admitted that she has placed students in special education but she couldn’t
recall ever using the word “disability” with parents. If she could put a label on the
disability such as autism, then the label would be used with parents, otherwise the
disability term was avoided. When she discussed the possibility of special education, she
described it as a place where, “he can get more help than we can provide for him.” Ann
explained it to parents like this:

We’ve talked about their views about special education and just, this is what
we’re doing right now and we’re going to see; and if this works we’ll just
continue helping him. But it may get to a point where he may need more help
than we can provide for him, as just one general education teacher.

In that explanation, Ann was saying to parents there is only so much she, as a teacher,
could do. She implied the limitation was not so much a lack of expertise but rather one
of time. She was diplomatic explaining to parents that their child needed to leave her
classroom because of the student’s limitations rather than the lack of her time to address
the student’s needs.
I asked Ann how she thought children learned, and this was her response:

I would say there is a variety of ways. I, myself, am a visual learner and like the hands on, but I would say a lot of kids are that way, that visual helps them and getting their hands in there helps them. But other kids, I mean, learn auditory, you know, and enjoy listening to the teacher give them facts and things like that. But I say, for the most part, um, being able to just get in there and do it, um, I am trying to think of a word, not inclusion (laughs), but inquiry! The inquiry approach of just finding out for yourself, and having that guidance and just having something to fall back on though in case you are just not quite there yet; and then working with other students is huge. They can hear what other students are saying, what other students are thinking, and I think that especially at first grade, to hear another child explain it in their terms when a teacher—I mean a teacher has so much background knowledge they forget that the child has to bring the steps up—and like you hear it from a peer sometimes [it] is so much easier to understand what is going on.

While Ann was advocating the inquiry approach to learning, I was not able to observe her applying this method of teaching when I was in her classroom. I did inquire whether or not she knew which students preferred one method of learning over another and she responded:

To a point I could go through all twenty-two kids and say this child is learning in exactly this way, I think. I think someone is not always completely a visual learner. I mean they do also have some auditory skill and things like that. I could point out some of the children and say, yeah, they really needed to see it this way in order to grasp it, but not all twenty-two kids.

No formal assessment of learning preferences were given to the students by Ann. This was her observation and experience with her students which led her to these conclusions.

When I did observe Ann’s classroom, the students were quiet, working on the tasks assigned by her, and aware of what to do if they finished their work before others. I questioned how she was able to get the students to do what she wanted with little or no behavior problems that I could detect. This was her explanation:
It just depends, but it all starts at the beginning of school and establishing a routine, and I try as much as you can to keep a schedule. Of course, you always have those things that happen throughout the day and things at school, things you have to do through school, and things that are thrown in there, but trying to keep that schedule predictability that we know what is going to come next. We have rules. I have my signs that have worked, expectations up on the board. So, like when it is teacher time, I show the kids: There are pictures, there are visuals up there that say what is expected of you—where should you be, what can you get up out of your desk and do, you know, and what is appropriate, what you would be looking at and so then at work time the expectations change. They know when they are working there is a different kind of voice they can use and then, there is quiet time, the expectation and so there is a visual big poster in front of the room that shows them that. I sometimes—and I don’t every year—but sometime if we are having problems and kids are just not quite understanding what is expected of them, we sometimes do a behavior, like a class behavior thing, where they are doing—I know in kindergarten, they use the green and yellow lights, um, I don’t do that every year. It is usually if I have three or four kids that just really need it and then we make it kind of a class thing so it’s not like I am picking on those kids.

Ann believed her class during this study was “very well rounded.” She felt if there wasn’t a routine or a schedule and there weren’t clear expectations, she would probably have, in her words, “two children that were at the beginning of the year [who would find it] harder to follow class rules, but now they know what is expected and so a gentle reminder can get them right back on track.” I asked Ann if she used any stickers or rewards of any kind with her students. She indicated not this year, but she has used them before. She has done individual behavior charts as she explained:

I have charts on kids’ desks where they are working on a certain goal; when it is just one child . . . [that] really is just really struggling, then I will make an individual behavior chart for them.

The most challenging aspect of teaching, from Ann’s perspective, was the accountability through evidenced-based data to justify the decisions she made about her students. She insightfully described it like this:
Number one is getting too caught up in—sometimes—the data and being able to prove something and being able to show it on paper. Sometimes you miss the whole child. You get so specific on having to look at something and chart it and show that they are making progress and we have to be able to test it in order to show that and you can't test all abilities the child can do. When I am teaching, I am looking at the whole child. I am looking at life skills. I am looking at reading. I am looking at everything that the child is made up into being. It's just not about whether or not this child can perform this well on a test. You have to know your child and I feel that we are judged so much by our test performances. And that is just such a small part of what a child can do.

I asked her where she thought the judgment and pressure originated and she replied:

I would say it trickles down and it depends. I would think that the government at one point is the head and the buck stops at the government. But it is the administrators— but I am sure they have—I don't know where all the pressures. . . but I am sure it is coming from somewhere else, down from the Superintendent, to the administrators. I feel our administrator is better at being able to look at the whole child, but then she also has to prove to other people that our test scores are doing well. I don't know, the public? I know that is what they see in the papers, is the test scores, but I would think as parents, though, when you actually have your child in the school they understand about the whole child and then are not as much looking at the test scores.

Ann felt this pressure for her colleagues but not so much for herself because of her first grade position. She said:

Maybe it is because it is first grade, because the pressure is not as hard in first grade to have. As you get older, the test scores, all of a sudden— you know, we are laying a foundation as you know, I am laying that foundation, then not testing as much. We only have one standardized test, you know, that we give the children. We don't get measured on that standardized test, obviously, testing first graders is hard so they— I don't think they take the data and say this is the end all that we are doing. As they get older and older, I think that does happen, but other teachers feel more pressure to score well on tests.

Ann’s Professional World

Classroom Environment

The first thing I noticed when I entered Ann's classroom were the two teacher desks at opposite sides of the room. Then I recalled that she was a part-time teacher, and
therefore I concluded each teacher must have her own desk. The student desks were the same type of desk that Lynn had in her classroom and they were grouped by fours, two desks facing each other, in the middle of the room.

As I began to look at the materials and information hanging on the walls, I realized most had to do with reading and reading skills. There was a bit of information on the writing process, a bit on increasing student’s self esteem through the Very Important Person (VIP) bulletin board, and the classroom rules for behavior were posted in two different ways and two different places.

The reading information included a poster entitled, Reading Strategies, which appeared to be from their new reading series. It was numbered with an eight and had five reading strategies listed on it. The first strategy was “look at the letters from left to right.” The second strategy said “think about the sounds for the letters, and look for word parts you know.” “Blend the sounds to read the word” was strategy number three. The fourth strategy was “Ask yourself: Is it a word I know? Does it make sense in what I am reading? The last strategy was a follow-up from number four, “If not, ask yourself: What else can I try?” This poster was held up on an unused chalkboard with magnetic holders. On the chalk ledge was a Big Book, but the cover was hidden behind the piles of material the teacher had on her desk, abutting and perpendicular to the chalkboard. There were also two individual white boards and a wide eraser, five copies of *We Are Monsters* books, a copy of a photocopied pages entitled *Wonders of Nature*, and ten copies of *Amy Loves the Snow* also leaning on the chalk ledge.
To the left and right of this chalkboard were bulletin boards. The bulletin board to the left was entitled “Work Board” with a red background and a bulletin board border with apples and pencil cartoon figures around it. The “Work Board” has four or five students’ names above a series of three pictures. The pictures are illustrations of independent activities for the students. They know which ones are available to them by looking at the “Work Board” and finding their name. The various pictures depicts tasks such as: ABC, children reading, browsing box, poems, one person reading, headphones, dry erase board, scissors, pencil, paintbrush, and game board. The right bulletin board also had a red background and said VIP with the name Abbey and pictures of Abbey with her family. The VIP board selection of featured students was rotated through the class, so by the end of the year all students in Ann’s classroom had the opportunity to share about themselves.

On the floor under the chalkboard were two boxes of leveled readers from the new reading series the district just adopted and a large gray container from their science kit *Pebbles, Sand and Silt*. There was also a plastic container of wooden geometric shapes.

In front of the chalkboard was a kidney shaped table with nine chairs around it. It was cleared off with the exception of two, small plastic cups from the science kits. To the left of this table were free standing shelves, painted blue, four levels high. On the bottom level was a cookie sheet with more white computer paper and a plastic box with plastic tiles of letters of the alphabet. On the second shelf from the bottom was a container with drawers; one with letters of the alphabet and one with strips of paper in it.
Beside that container were cardboard standup holders for the strips of paper with letters to be placed to spell a word. This was homemade. There was a purchased kit from Scholastic Publishing entitled *Alphabet Letters and Sounds*, which contained foam letters, pictures, and a teaching guide. The third shelf from the bottom held three plastic containers with leveled readers from the new series. They had labels on them: below level, on level, and above level. There was also another purchased kit, very dusty, on the shelf, with labels saying Grade One and Letters, Word, and Picture Cards. The top shelf had two piles of leveled books from their series, all different titles, a box of Kleenex, another stack of books from Scholastic that appeared to be leveled by the teacher as they each had a colored dot on it with a capital letter such as H or J. Also on the top shelf was a cardboard blue filing box with worksheets that had been copied for future use. Some were for math, some for spelling, and some were teacher-made papers which only had a guided handwriting line at the bottom of it.

Behind the teacher desk, perpendicular to the chalkboard, was a small student desk and a student chair. Upon occasion, a student would come back to the desk to work at the teacher’s request. There were two four-drawer file cabinets in the corner with a television hanging above them. On the floor in front of the file cabinets were two pillows, a large square one and a long rectangular one. The top of the file cabinets held various items such as an electric pencil sharpener, books, video tapes, cassette tapes, in no apparent order.

On another wall in the room hung teacher-made posters of word families—an, -at,-ap-with words created underneath each of them. There was a teacher-made picture of
a dog with an “o” on it. In addition, a poster also informed the reader of phonics such as ai (long a), and silent e with word cards pasted under these two columns. In the first category were words such as pail, wait, plain, tail, bait, mail, gain, pain, nail, while under silent e were gave, plane, cape, wave, flake, take, sale, same, safe, and whale. The students could also learn about writing from a poster the teacher made entitled “What’s Important When Writing a Book?” Ideas were written under the title in the teacher’s handwriting. The ideas included: use your imagination; take your time; concentrate on what you are doing; think through your story; write neatly; make sure your pictures match; match your words; get ideas from friends but don’t copy their work; and beginning, middle, and end.

A computer was located along this wall. It was the only one in the room and I couldn’t tell if students, teachers, or both used it. It was not running when I was in the room. Behind the computer was a freestanding bookshelf painted dark blue. The bottom shelf had copies of The New Golden Dictionary with a 1972 copyright date. The second shelf had containers of crayons and markers with more located on the top shelf as well. The top shelf of the bookcase, along with the crayons and markers was a rack for picture books such as If You Take a Mouse to School and The True Francine. On the floor near the computer was a crate which held stuffed animals such as a large, white stuffed teddy bear and a stuffed Arthur, from the Arthur series of books.

Farther down the west wall of Ann’s classroom was a black bookcase. Plastic tubs of books were located on its shelves. The books had colored stickers on them indicating different reading levels. One tub was labeled “winter,” another “nonfiction,”
and another “easy readers number two.” The other three tubs of books did not have labels. On the floor near this bookcase was a black file container with hanging file folders, each with a student’s name on it. The files appeared to have student work in most of the folders. There was also a two-drawer filing cabinet setting on the floor. On top of the file cabinet was a miniature wooden bench like one typically seen in a park. Sitting on this small bench were three stuffed animal characters from children’s books that I recognized but couldn’t name. A word wall, very similar to Lynn’s, was also located on the west wall.

Beneath the Word Wall was a teacher-made poster with the behavior plan listed. Colored rectangles indicated the levels of consequences for each infraction. Each color signified a different response: green for “great job!,” yellow for “warning,” purple for “five minutes of recess,” blue for “ten minutes of recess,” orange said “lose all recess,” and red for “phone call home or a note home or office.” Next to this poster was a teacher-made pocket-chart with library pockets pasted on it, each of which was decorated with colored stars and was labeled with a different child’s name. Inside were strips of paper of every color from the behavior chart. The day I observed the chart, all twenty-two students, except for Zoey and Kay, had green as the first strip in their pocket. Zoey and Kay had yellow as their first strip of paper.

Other behavior management information included teacher-made, laminated posters of cartoon people which were colored in with markers. The people were saying things like “Initiative—to do something because it needs to be done,” “Problem-solving—to seek solutions and put them into action,” “Creativity—to have or express
original ideas," “Friendship—to make and keep a friend by caring for them and caring about them,” “Caring—feel and show concern for others,” “Responsibility—to do what is expected of you,” “Confidence—to feel able to do it,” “Perseverance—to keep at it and complete what you start,” and “Integrity—to act according to right and wrong words.”

The Stepping Stone Program

As mentioned previously, Ann taught in the same elementary building as Lynn, but Ann’s responsibilities were for students enrolled in the Stepping Stone Program. This program is described for the public as “An Alternative Elementary Program,” and Ann’s classroom was composed of first graders. Ann’s students differed from other first graders in the building in that they would remain together as a cohort through fifth grade. Parents choose this model of grouping students, and the students must remain in the program for five years. Ann described it in this way:

So they stay with their peers in second, third, fourth, and fifth [grades]. And the other thing unique about us is we all teach reading and math at the exact same time. So, if I have a child that is farther advanced, then I feel that I can meet their needs and they can go to another classroom, whether it’s reading or math instruction.

In other words, if students were beyond Ann’s instruction in their comprehension of the material she was teaching, she could send students to another teacher at a higher grade level. I immediately questioned whether or not students from higher grade levels were ever sent “down” to first grade if their skill level indicated a need to do so. Her reply indicated:

First and second grade not so much. We don’t do a lot of going back from second grade down to first grade but when they get into third and fourth, they do a lot more mixing because we feel the kids can handle it better—the kind of shuffling around and those two classrooms are truly multi-age. The desks in one room are
third and fourth grade desks and the desks in the other room are third and fourth grade desks. When they do reading, each teacher does sometimes a third grade level and she’s got a fourth grade level in their room so the kids really have no idea where they are at—more in the third and fourth grade room.

In addition to the academic advantages Ann described with the Stepping Stone program, there seemed to be some affective advantages for students as well. These advantages were harder to observe, yet were evident through comments made by members of the community. One middle school teacher was understood to have told a parent who was undecided about the Stepping Stone Program that the Stepping Stone children were the ones who accepted special education students better than other students. Ann described the conversation in this way:

The middle school just gave a huge compliment [to the Stepping Stone Program]. One of the middle school teachers up there—someone was struggling whether or not they wanted to put their child in Stepping Stone or not, and they said, you don’t notice who the Stepping Stone kids are a lot, except when it come to special ed students and they are the ones who accept the special ed students the most. They are loving towards them and they look out for them and you know exactly who’s their family.

That was feedback from teachers at the middle school in the same district who didn’t teach in the Stepping Stone program but received students from it. Ann used this example to describe how students who were involved in the Stepping Stone program treated special needs students after they left the program. I was not able to observe this actually happening in the elementary building, nor did I go to the middle school building in the district and observe or conduct interviews. Some of the middle school teachers also told the Stepping Stone teachers “that the way they can tell a Stepping Stone student is how they teach kids. . .”
This program seemed to be popular with a number of teachers and parents, so much so that there was a waiting list of students who wanted to participate in the program. No achievement data were shared with me to determine if there was a difference between students in the Stepping Stone Program and those who were in the traditional first grade programs, yet many parents wanted their students in the program and the teachers, like Ann, felt it was very beneficial for students. Ann also expressed the possibility, although it was not her decision to make, that special education students were “steered our way” when it came to parents needing to choose a program for their child. Ann articulated it this way:

Sometimes I feel that some of the special education students are steered our way due to that familiarity and that family feeling we have—that they are with the same group of kids from each grade level and it fosters a nice atmosphere for them. So sometimes I think some of the students are steered a little bit more because of that.

The “steering” was done through the counselors and “maybe the kindergarten teacher.” The Stepping Stone Program began in first grade; therefore the kindergarten teachers may have had some influence on parental decisions. All the students went through the same kindergarten program and after that was completed, parents made “their choice of where to go.” The kindergarten teachers knew the students by the end of the year and possibly “steered” the parents into a program they felt would be best for the students.

Because the Stepping Stone Program had “more of the special ed students that are more weighted [funded higher],” Ann explained that associates were available throughout the whole program in different ways, at each teacher’s discretion. “So it’s
very nice." She always had someone else (in her words) "connected to my room." As she explained further:

It's never been just me, as a teacher, in the room. A lot of time associates come in and out to help different students. But we use them, not to just help that student, but to kind of help as a second teacher too. That has really worked well and I enjoy having a second set of hands.

I was asked if this alternative elementary program created any unique situations among teaching staff members. Ann replied:

Back when it first started, I was not here when it started, but it created a lot of bad feelings between some of the teachers. And some teachers still feel if a parent chooses Stepping Stone that they are choosing this program and not [the traditional program]. But, on the other hand, they are also choosing traditional. I feel they are choosing either one. There's sometimes—like Stepping Stone gets all the smart kids or gets all the good kids or comments like that. I think over the years it has really changed and there's not as much unique and these kinds of feelings going on. But there's always just a little bit behind people. You have to be careful of the comments you make.

As Ann was describing this to me she chose her words carefully and wanted, as she has throughout this interview, to have me see things as she saw them. When she spoke about the need to be careful about the comments being made, I interpreted that to mean there are still teachers in the building who have issues with the whole Stepping Stone program. What those issues were I was not sure. Perhaps it was the perception that the Stepping Stone program is a quietly elite program taking one type of student away from the traditional program, or perhaps it was the competitive nature set up when parents must choose between two programs within a school for their child. To relieve that tension, I asked Ann if there was ever any consideration of implementing the program building-wide. Ann said:
Yes, yes. That’s what—when the last superintendent came she said why don’t we do this building-wide? This makes sense. And the reason it hasn’t been done building-wide yet, and there still is talk, there is still talk about it, maybe not to the extent that we do it, but putting kids in, I don’t know, it’s called a loop, where they go to the same teachers and the whole peer group would stay the same and you would go all the way up through fifth grade. There is talk about that but I don’t know how far it is. Mainly it’s teachers talking now and talking to the principal about it now. The biggest thing, the reason it hasn’t gone so far is, I think, it’s just teacher time and commitment. Being in the Stepping Stone program does take a little more work because of the time we spend doing schedules and stuff like that. You don’t get to go to your own room and shut your door. You always have to be thinking about four other teachers and what they are doing.

Thinking and planning with other teachers is what attracted Ann to the program. She had been teaching at Flicker Elementary for ten years, all of them in the Stepping Stone Program. When she was hired, she replaced a teacher who was teaching in the program. She felt very fortunate to be able to teach in a structure like that:

I feel I’ve been very fortunate to start out in the Stepping Stone Program and I think I have a different experience because of that. I’ve never had my own classroom that’s secluded by myself. I’ve always worked with a team and since I’ve started it’s been very nice to have that team to go to with problems and stuff like that.

**Ann’s Understanding of the Special Education Eligibility Process**

There were times when Ann had a special needs student placed in her classroom, but there had been other times when she was the one who initiated the referral process. In Ann’s ten years of teaching, the process had evolved and she began by explaining to me the current process:

The procedure is, at first, if the teacher feels there is a need for this child—they aren’t quite performing up to grade level—they start out with a Supplemental plan and that’s just changing some way that you are teaching. Maybe pulling that child back for five minutes at a time to talk about that thing, and it’s targeting a certain skill. And you do that for about six to eight weeks and you kind of watch that. And you meet with CAT [child assistance team] teams and evaluate how
that’s going. If you feel, after the Supplemental is done and it’s working, then maybe you better continue with the Supplemental or tweak it a little bit to make it better. But, then, at that time if you feel it’s still not adequate for that child, then we move to the Intensive procedure. That’s when we are meeting in a big group and we are bringing parents in and talking and deciding what are the skills that the child really needs to target and then it’s written up as an Intensive. It could be the teacher, it could be the special ed teacher, it could be a Title 1 teacher, that is giving those services, but it is more of an intense fifteen minutes—ten to fifteen minutes a day that the child is being pulled out individually on a certain target skill. After four weeks, you then evaluate that, look at the data, they are being pulled for probes, once a week they are being probed, usually by the Western Hills Agency staff to see how they are doing on the data. And then after four weeks, it if is not working, they change it; and if it is working, they continue to do it. And then kind of make a decision after eight weeks how we are to go from there.

This was a lot of information she shared rapidly with me so I needed to back up and ask her to explain some of the language in it. I first asked how she determined the target skills at the Supplemental level of support. She told me:

Looking at the overall child and where is it—if it’s reading—where is it that this child is struggling the most? In kindergarten it may be letter recognition. They just aren’t seeming to understand what those letters are and with more practice individually that maybe we can get that through to them. And like in first grade maybe it’s the word wall words. They just aren’t getting those word wall words and retaining them as the other kids are. So you just kind of look at what you expect that child to know [relative to] what the peers know and pull something out. The thing with the Supplemental is it has to be something you can, well, more in the Intensive too, that you have to be able to test it. Sometimes that is a drawback because there are all these different skills you would like the child to work on, but you have to get something you can get data on. Or that is—looking for the word—that has a grade equivalent that we can compare them to.

Since she seemed uncertain about “grade equivalent,” I asked if she was looking for the word “norms” instead. She said, “Yes, the norms. So it limits you, especially when the child is younger to what you can be working on and what you can be testing them on.”

Supplemental plans were usually implemented by the classroom teacher. Ann clarified what a Supplemental plan might look like:
And [in] the Supplemental we consider those things as not always pulling a child back, but maybe altering their assignment so it meets their needs, or making a switch. Maybe it’s an attention thing that you are working with. And a Supplemental might be creating an office for that child and having the child work in an office to help them. So it can be as simple as that and then you write that you’ve been doing that. And I always think that it’s things that teachers do naturally, but now you need to write that down and document it and see how things are going and [that] makes them look a little more intense at it.

The group, referred to as the child assistance team, or CAT, would meet every other week to discuss students and their progress on their Supplemental plans. The team consisted of the school principal, a counselor, a Western Hills (not the real name) employee and other teachers if appropriate. Western Hills, an intermediary agency funded by the state through local taxes, allocates personnel resources school districts could not typically employ, such as school psychologists, social workers, speech and language pathologists and special education consultants. Flicker Elementary had available to them a person in each of these disciplines, distributed so that just one Western Hills person participated in each CAT team meeting.

If Ann wanted one of her students to progress to the Intensive level, and the CAT team members supported that decision, then she would attend a Child Study Team meeting. The membership of this team consisted of additional Western Hills employees and “pretty much everybody” who had been working with the student, including the principal and the counselor. If a child didn’t progress enough at the Supplemental level, then he or she was placed on an Intensive plan. This plan was implemented by the paraeducators, special education teachers or the Title One Reading teachers, whoever had “that chunk of time that you can work with that child individually every day.” Ann explained in further detail the Intensive process:
We do the Intensive for four weeks and then we look at it and if it’s making progress we decide: Are we—do we need to change anything after four weeks to get that progress going? Or if it’s not working do we need to revamp our thoughts? And then after eight weeks we look at it again and that’s when you look at those charts to see where is that child at. We give them a line of progress that we want them to make. Are they making that line of progress? And then we decided if we continue doing this is that going to help the child and give them that boost they need? Or is this something that’s really, it’s just not working and this child needs some help on a more consistent basis and then we start looking at the IEP.

I wondered how the decision was made, and who made it to determine if the child was making acceptable progress or not, so I asked Ann if she, as the teacher, made that decision. She replied:

No, that’s the whole Western Hills system and sitting down with you. Plus, usually I bring the special education teacher up there to kind of get their opinion on it and so it’s a group decision. We meet and then we also bring in parents after that to see what they think.

I wanted to know specifically what information the group would review to determine if a child was making progress. Ann added this information to my understanding:

I guess when I come to those meetings I come with all my stuff too—all of the data I keep on the child. The thing with the Intensive Plan is it’s usually one skill, so it’s targeting, like I said, Word Wall Words or it’s targeting being able to isolate sounds. The thing is, when you are looking at a child for an IEP there is so much more than that one skill. Even though they are mastering that one skill, there are these other fifteen areas of reading we are worrying about, so sometimes the flaw in the Intensive is a little bit—is you isolate things so much and that’s not how your learning happens. That’s not how you are when you are in school. You don’t just have to know sounds, you have to know all these other things, so I usually bring documents to show where they are compared to the class in all these other things that I’m expecting the child to do and see if that Intensive is helping with anything else and carrying over; and if it’s not something that is carrying over into anything, then does this child really need help in a lot of areas than just this one Intensive area?
Because I was picking up on some frustration with this process in Ann's voice, I wanted to hear how she thought it compared with the process she used when she started teaching nine years ago. I asked her to compare her work in getting special education support for students nine years ago and now. This is what she said:

Let me think back to what it was. This is just a lot more, I would say paperwork, on the part of the Intensive. And it does allow you to really look at what you are trying to get that child to do, and I kind of get what it is trying to do. It's really trying to focus you on this child and if the child really needs this help. Back five years ago, I think the process was more of teachers saying I need some help, what are some ideas, let's try some things. It wasn't, okay let's give that child four weeks, let's give that child eight weeks. It wasn't so intense. We didn't give them that extra help. We moved maybe—I don't know if we moved faster or not—we did a lot more sitting around the table talking.

Because she didn't mention the use of any IQ tests as part of the earlier process, I questioned her if she remembered anyone giving IQ tests to children. She told me:

Sometimes, not all the time, that was, yes, even though nine years they were trying to get away from that a little bit even when I first came, that they didn't really want to give a lot of IQ tests. But, yes, I do remember our old school psychologist giving some IQ tests to kids, and I don't know if that told us a lot either. That was just one piece of the puzzle. A lot of it was just looking at the test, but then just, you know, just having the teacher bring up what they have and then the other staff analyzing that and deciding from that what they thought of that.

There were other flaws in the "old" process in addition to the IQ tests being only one "piece of the puzzle." Ann described another flaw:

We still had to go to a lot of meetings, we had to bring up. I felt like [in] the old system I repeated myself a lot more because I had to present it to this group, and then this group, and to hear this, and so I did kind of feel like a broken record the old way.
The “new” process had its flaws as well. Ann already mentioned the need to find an isolated skill which was normed for comparison. If this child made progress on that isolated skill, Ann still felt a flaw in the system:

I struggle with the Intensive being this very certain skill even though the graph shows yes, the child made progress on this skill, I believe it’s because this child had one-on-one time for eighteen minutes a day on that one particular skill and I hope they could make progress on it, but that’s not the reality of the classroom.

She also felt this new system for supporting student learning was more of a “numbers game” than it was about helping students. In other words, she was revealing unstated frustration that the new system, which was designed as a preventive system toward getting students into special education, was only delaying the eligibility process; as a teacher, she knew when she was at her limit and it was time for the student to move on to someone else for more support. Ann saw the system as an unwarranted shifting of the burden for eligibility onto the teacher. The following was a typical expression of that feeling:

I sometimes feel that the eight weeks is not a magic number and with the Supplemental—it’s like we get caught in the numbers game. And if you didn’t do the Supplemental or you didn’t write it down, and it’s like if we didn’t do that for the eight weeks then we can’t go to the Intensive. And some kids I feel we’re then just prolonging this time; they were falling behind and so instead of looking and really sitting down and discussing this child, it’s like okay, you need to do this first, and do this for eight weeks and then— oh, wait—we have to do this now. And you give that child a shot and you don’t just want to write an IEP for them, but there are kids who really need help right away. And so, sometimes, it’s kind of like we prolong it and the child gets further and further behind. And it’s like, well, since we didn’t put him, you know, we didn’t have our eight weeks in before the end of the year, so we need to start next year all over with this. And then it’s like the child is in second grade and the child’s moved—it’s half the year through second grade—how long are we going to make this child wait to get the services they need? And not that the teacher is not trying to do the things they need to do in the classroom, but there’s only so much the teacher can do.
I wanted to know if the process Ann described, called Instructional Decision Making by Western Hills Agency, was in any way related to the national Response to Intervention (RTI; IDEA, 2004) movement, but I had run out of time to ask her the question. I was, however, able to come back to the question in our next interview, a month later.

During our next interview, I referred to RTI and asked her if she knew what the initials represented or if she had ever heard of them. She laughed and said, “No, all these initials!” I told her they stood for Response to Intervention and that Instructional Decision Making was modeled after RTI. The Response to Intervention model is an ongoing process of using student performance and other data to guide instruction and intervention decisions. The major components, essential to the success of the model, are high quality instruction, interventions matched to the student’s needs and the use of learning rate over time and level of performance to make important educational decisions (Batsche et al., 2005). She accepted that and once again I probed to see what her perception was of Instructional Decision Making as a process for helping students and identifying students as eligible for special education. Her response was more positive during this interview than it was last month. Here is what she said:

I think, overall, it is working nicely. It has good attributes of Supplementals and Intensives, and I do like the fact that they are working with the child for fifteen minutes on something—or whatever that happens to be when it gets to the Intensive. But Supplemental, you know in my room—I am not sure what all the other teachers are like, you know, doing in their room—but I think Supplementals are things teachers are always already doing, they just now made, you know, now fill out a paper and say that you are doing it with a child. It’s things you would do, I would think, naturally. Now maybe, in another classroom, it wouldn’t be done naturally and maybe that is why they’re considered a Supplemental because maybe some teachers don’t just naturally make those accommodations for children that are having problems.
Ann saw the intensive process a bit differently:

Then the Intensive, that is something that I probably haven’t done as much of in my classroom, you know, actually setting aside that much time for a child to do. The only problem with that is finding the time. It’s been nice, you can use other teachers beside yourself, because we simply, you know, because to say I’m going to sit down ten or fifteen minutes with a child while the rest of the kids are in there is kind of hard. You sometimes can make it work and sometimes you can’t.

Ann then came back to the major flaw in the new system which she presented earlier in our interview:

The one thing that I have a hard time with, with this model, is we look at a little bit of the child and it has to be something that we can measure and so that limits you to what you can do with the child. And so whether I have a child that I am working in math and they are struggling with kind of the whole concept of addition and subtraction and numbers and before and after and really are struggling with the whole thing, but then it is like, okay, well let’s pick out one or two things that we are dealing with. Okay, let’s pick out number recognition and more or less. Well, what about all the other things the child, you know, even though the child has made progress with more or less and number recognition, they are still struggling with all these other things and putting it altogether and that is where I have a hard time. And I think it gives us a little leeway to look at the whole child, but not as much. We are driven by that data again. The person doing the intensive has to be able to come down and test that child and there are only certain things that are normed. There are only certain things that they can compare them to their peers and a lot of kids are having disabilities in some of those areas is not something you can norm. It’s you know, it is a processing thing or something like that. That’s the part I struggle with, is just you know, kind of like, here I am just going to help you with this part, but you know, you do as a teacher help with everything else but it’s just, I’m just going to look at this part and if this part is getting good we are doing fine. But we are really not because everything else is still down here.

I was interested in knowing if she thought the “old” system was better at looking at the whole child and she replied, “I don’t know, is there a right answer, I don’t think so. I think that had its faults too. You know, it’s just so hard.”
My last question to her about this eligibility process revolved around the possibility of entitling more or fewer students to special education as a result of the Instructional Decision Making. Ann spoke hesitantly when she answered the question:

In the last three years, yes, I feel like I have served the kids that have gone through my classroom with this approach. I, I, I don’t-it may be almost drew the process out a little bit longer because to get through your Supplemental, to get through your Intensive, and things like that, sometimes I feel like you are losing some [time]. It’s great to do the Intensive to see if it works. For some kids, we are losing some kids, we are losing some ground, losing some time that we could have had we could maybe be doing something more than just what that Intensive’s doing.

When she mentioned the lost time, I told her some people have said this process enables the student to get help sooner because of the intensive work and so the need for special education really wouldn’t be all that much different. I wondered what she thought about that so I asked her to comment on it. This was her response:

Well, it depends on what the child is struggling with. (sighs) Again, the Intensive is a specific skill we are working on. So yes, you are getting that Intensive on that skill, but I think with my special ed teacher working together, if she would be allowed to work more with him, it would be more working with the whole child and not just for six weeks, focusing on one skill, yeah, you are focusing on that one skill but you also have some other skills that you are getting to happen.

Specific Students

Seth

Ann invited me to a Child Study Team meeting where she was going to discuss one of her students, Seth, who had been on a Supplemental plan for organization. I was pleased to be able to attend so that I could observe first hand the team process. The team had met about Seth before so I felt like I was coming into the middle of a conversation at the beginning of the meeting. From what I understood from Ann before the meeting,
Seth was of Asian descent and had been adopted by his white, middle class parents at the age of six months. He didn’t speak until he was three, and Ann alluded to possible difficulties in Seth’s life before he was adopted. Seth’s parents had recommended the school test him as they were concerned he was not progressing or acting like other children. By the time of the meeting, Seth was to have gone to a medical clinic for an evaluation, but Ann had not heard from the parents as to the result of that visit. The occupational therapist from Western Hills did evaluate Seth and from her report, Ann and the speech and language pathologist had developed a plan of action. They had discussed the plan before the meeting between the two of them and brought it forth to the team to consider. As Ann described it;

Since writing [written expression] is a big problem, we sat down and decided what we can do to help him in that area and came up with a couple things that I would like to try and I’m not sure if we want to write this into a Supplemental or how exactly that is all going to go.

The counselor agreed it would be a new Supplemental plan if it was written expression because the previous Supplemental plan was for organization. Ann continued describing her plan:

At school we are going to try these wordless books with him and they are just books that are laid out and this is called My Day and it is a picture of him getting up, a picture of him eating breakfast, brushing his hair, and doing all these different things. We are going to make them into a book [the pages were printed two to a side and had to be cut apart]. I will make this fun. And then he’s going to write a sentence to go with the pictures and then we can see if we can get that sequence of events kind of happening in his brain and see if he can actually do that.

Ann also recounted that his parents wanted to work with him at home so she had story starters which she was planning on sending home for the parents to use. They could sit
down with Seth and he would finish the sentence in the story starter and write another sentence. She thought this would “get those ideas in his head that he would like to talk about and see if that helps.” Ann told the team those were the two ideas she had to support Seth with his writing. Then she moved on to his organizational problem and his work completion problem. Her Supplemental plan to help him with his organizational problem was to “keep everything out of his desk” and she wanted to continue the plan. For his work completion problem she told the team she was going to place on the corner of his desk Velcro strips with “cute little Velcro things” which he can move from one side of his desk to another when he completes an assignment. As Seth would complete a reading sheet, he would move one of the “Velcro things” to the other side of his desk and go get the next paper. Ann planned on having him do the same things for his math worksheets.

The special education teacher questioned the creativity loss which seemed to be inherent in the wordless books and the story starters. She wondered if he had creative ideas and suggested journaling instead. Ann’s response to that suggestion was that the problem was he couldn’t come up with any ideas on his own or as she said it, “we try to give him an idea to start with because he can’t get the ideas.” The special education teacher didn’t give up on the idea yet and offered that perhaps he could remember one or two things he did at school which would take creativity. She said to Ann, “You could try. He’s very bright.” Ann agreed he was bright but trying to get those ideas out on paper was difficult for him as she stated, “he’ll come up all the time and tell me tidbits of whatever is happening in his brain, but to sit and have a conversation back and forth, give
and take, is tough.” The concept of wordless books and story starters were further reinforced by Ann as she noted immediately following the comment about Seth’s inability to get a conversation going, “and there’s different ones than My Day. I thought we’d start with that because I thought that might be easiest, but there are nonfiction ones. . . having him take a look at a picture of a tiger or a cat.” The special education teacher then stopped advocating for something different and closed by saying, “And maybe because that is the type of thing I always hated, because I don’t think that way.”

The team discussion then moved to a question about his vocabulary. His reading scores that were shared by Ann, indicated his total reading score on the standardized test was second grade, sixth month, but his vocabulary score was at the kindergarten level. Ann had an explanation, yet she also expressed puzzlement to the team:

It’s just what words you have heard in life, like a window sill. It’s like a ledge and it’s just, if you come across those words you’ll do fine. I have kids that are reading at third grade level that get kindergarten scores for vocabulary. And then I get a student like Miranda, who we’ll bring up next, who scored huge on vocabulary but her reading scores are real low. I just don’t get it.

Ann’s colleague, another teacher from the Stepping Stone program, questioned how Seth took the test. After a clarification about what she was asking, Ann replied that she never really knew if he was “with me. . . he’s in his own little world.” Yet, if he was “in his own little world” why did he score a 2.6 on his reading test? That was something Ann couldn’t explain. She did admit to the team that “sometimes in class he’s, I think he’s totally somewhere else and he sits down and does what he’s supposed to do.”

This meeting on Seth concluded with Ann summarizing her understanding of the meeting: she remarked on his math being average, she would start a Supplemental plan
for improving his written expression, and change his Supplemental plan on organization.

She also reminded the team there were concerns expressed by Seth’s parents the prior year. She said, “he didn’t talk until he was three and he then started talking and took off. The hard thing is, [his] academics are good and so it is hard for them [parents] to think what the other missing piece is.”

Four weeks later, the team met again to discuss Seth’s progress. The team members consisted of the counselor, school psychologist and Ann, all of whom attended when Seth was last discussed; in addition, the speech and language pathologist, absent from the previous meeting, was now present. The speech and language pathologist and Ann, however, had discussed Seth prior to the last meeting, and had determined the goals for his speech work with her.

The team meeting began with some confusion as to why they were meeting on Seth as it had only been four weeks since the last meeting. The school psychologist explained she “thought we probably better meet, kinda, at the end of the year to do some kind of wrap up or notation and just figuring...” Ann agreed with that idea. The school psychologist went on to say, “Two weeks into the beginning of next year we meet for the six week review. That seems a little (laughs) um, like we were more true to the process this way than the other way.” She then turned the meeting over to the speech and language pathologist for her report on Seth’s progress in working with oral narratives, listening to stories, answering questions, being able to retell pieces of the story, writing about it and drawing about it. Seth did an articulation problem, she noted, substituting an “f” sound for a “th” sound when he was speaking. If he didn’t fix that in a year, she
would begin working with him on that issue. The speech pathologist was going to close all her Supplemental plans, including Seth’s, and have him on a list to recheck in the fall as the language piece still concerned her.

The counselor then referred to a report from Seth’s visit to an evaluation clinic, on his parents’ decision. That report indicated that “he needed to be in a group for social skills and just with other kids.” She previously had him in a group, but currently didn’t have him in one at the time she received the recommendation from the clinic. So, she had begun seeing him and another little boy just recently and asked Ann if that was okay with her. Ann said it was fine and questioned how the session went. The team discussed Seth’s social skills outside of the work with the counselor and decided if they could talk about video games, movies, and cartoons, they could probably carry on a conversation with him. At this time, it was difficult to do so because no one knew the characters or what they did in any of the stories Seth was telling them.

Ann then reported on the progress with the wordless books and story starters that were part of his Intensive plan. She explained his progress in the last four weeks this way:

It’s going well. I mean, we are much more pleased with—what was happening before in reader’s workshop and things like that. Now, he’s not, of course, doing things like the kids are doing, and I just—it’s hard for him to get there because of that whole—you just can’t have that big array of stuff to think about, he has to be pretty narrow and so it takes him a while to get going in a book, but when he gets going, and he’s then been doing it for two days, then he—I mean, he gets excited about it and he enjoys doing it and does a very nice job with his book.

The speech and language pathologist questioned what Seth actually had to do during his story writing. Ann told her:
He’s looking at all the pictures first, because it actually did kind of tell a story. And then he decides where the story is going to go, and then he looks at a picture, and then he generates a sentence to go with the picture. Then we go back every day and reread what he has written, so he can keep the same story line going and just trying to get those ideas of what a story is.

Again, the speech pathologist questioned whether or not he was doing that independently. Ann said, “no.” She explained further:

I am not telling him how to spell things. He is very independent with writing down stuff and his spelling is amazing and—but it’s a matter of let’s talk about this. Okay, let’s do this. Okay what about coming up with a sentence to go with this. Okay, let’s talk about what we’ve read here. What would make sense here? There is a lot of prompting.

The school psychologist then brought in the data she was collecting to show his progress. She was collecting data on correct word sequences and total words written. She explained she was doing “Curriculum Based Measurement type written language probes” and it was scored in two different ways. First being the number of words the student had written, regardless of spelling, grammar, or anything else; second, the correct word sequences, which looked at spelling, punctuation, capitalization and the need to get two words right in a row to count as one correct word sequence. Here’s how she reported Seth’s progress:

And he’s generally kinda going up. We do a different first grade level story starter every week, which I think is quite a challenge for Seth. We do one minute to think about it, and I do a lot of prompting during that minute to try to kind of get him thinking about it—which kind of breaks standardization a bit, but I don’t think we get anything without breaking some standardization unfortunately. And then we’d have data that showed nothing. And I do prompt him to keep writing. Often he will write his one sentence that he’s kind of figured out and then he’s done and he’ll want to talk about everything else. So I do try to bring him back if he’s writing; ‘Okay what would happen next? If you were going to write one more thing, what would be here?’ Often his stories deal with aliens and kind of Spiderman. I see that as kind of a consistent thing and he really has a lot of
trouble coming up with ideas, which is what I think is pretty consistent with what you are seeing in the classroom.

Ann commented on Seth’s focus being so narrow. The school psychologist agreed:

It is, and he likes the ones better that are questions, but even then, you know, ‘What if dogs could read?’ was one story starter and he wrote, ‘What if dogs read snakes?’ I mean it wasn’t a completely—like—‘if it never stopped raining’ [another story starter], ‘I would stay inside and play all day’ [was Seth’s response]. Even I would [give an answer like that]. . . So, um, I think he continues to need intensive instruction.

Ann agreed Seth needed to continue on an Intensive Plan but she questioned, “Should the Intensive stay the same?” The school psychologist did not feel there should be any changes made, yet she didn’t like having to tell next year’s teacher what she had to do.

Ann assured her she would inform the teacher. Ann still questioned the focus of the Supplemental Plan and she expressed it this way:

But the only thing is, I don’t—this is giving him something worthwhile to do and—but are we growing his intelligence in this area of whatever? I don’t know if this is the key to getting him to the next level, but I don’t know what that key is right now.

The school psychologist pointed out that in second grade she would like to see him being able to use some “story organizers and . . . we can get him to do some preplanning. He’s got ideas if you can get him to focus, he could tell us beautiful stories.” Ann didn’t disagree with that comment, but she thought it would take a “good chunk of time to get those stories out, but once you got them out he could use that information to then make a story.” The psychologist thought the story maps would be a stepping stone toward more independence which “I think, somehow, has got to be our goal.” Ann agreed, but she knew next year’s teacher wouldn’t have that kind of time to
give to him, so she came up with a plan for next year. This is what she shared with the team:

I see maybe having the time where maybe an associate could actually, on Mondays and Tuesdays, could really spend—I mean you are talking a twenty minute shot if you want to get a story out of—you gotta commit twenty minute time period. And so that two days, and then have it laid out so he can be independent for three days after that, with the checking-in system with the teacher to just to get him focused on where he’s going with that. I can see that being beneficial but you really do need—cause we tried Batman and he did a Batman calendar story. And we tried to do that and I drew picture boxes and we ended up doing six boxes, but I mean two days, twenty minutes each, just to come up with six, ‘What happened next.’ And we didn’t develop—I mean there was no developing the characters, it was just a story. This happened, this happened, this happened. A sequence was pretty much all it was.

The school psychologist thought they could take a look at that in the fall. She asked the counselor, “Are we having a child study at the very beginning of the year to try to kick those [Intensives] off?” The counselor thought it would be a good idea. Seth’s Intensive Plan for writing would then continue into the fall.

Ann wanted the team to be sure they knew other things were working for him:

Like this checklist for reading is working in the mornings for him now... he was buying into this and all it was, was a simple—when the autistic specialist came out and she just kind of gives—she made a Post-it note system but we just made it, and we kind of made it into this, and he loves to put checkmarks in these little boxes, and then we just circle it when he goes to recess or center at the end, whichever he gets done with first. This works for reading.

She also wanted the team to know she was concerned about his “comprehension rate” and “just making accommodations.” Ann knew the curriculum in second grade included more of the “whys” and inferential learning, and she felt that was going to be extremely hard for Seth. Even though he could read the material easily, she was afraid he would not be able to comprehend what he was reading as it would be getting more difficult.
Apparently her concern stemmed from a comprehension activity she did with her whole class. Seth’s response to the activity was described by Ann:

But even when we were doing a comprehension packet with him one-on-one, and it just took him twice the amount of time that it took the other children that were pretty much doing it independently. He took twice as much time and he was doing it with teacher help, so that’s what I think is really going to be something that we are going to need a look at next year. What kind of aides or [support] given to that, because you can’t say, here, go answer these questions.

The team’s response to her concern was to ask about his new medication and if it was “working out.” This took me by surprise because this topic of conversation came toward the end of the team meeting and seemed to be incidental in the consideration of Seth’s difficulties. By Ann’s own admission, it was not an area she was deeply concerned about, nor was she adequately familiar with the particular type of medication he was taking. Ann then gave a report about his medication and its effects:

Yes, good, good, much better. After he went to the clinic, they took him off the meds he was on and I think those were for ADHD, ADD and things like that. I don’t know exactly what meds he’s on, but they took—I don’t know what it is but it’s for anxiety and it really has seemed to help. Now they said it was a medicine that would take two to four weeks to kick into his system. We saw results the next day, so I don’t know how that works, but he came back and was a changed child. And I don’t know if maybe because they took him off the other ones and that was doing something or what.

The counselor wanted to know how he was different. Ann indicated he was “with us more.” He seemed to be raising his hand and was more “tuned in” to what was going on in the classroom. Seth was not giving Ann eye contact but he was raising his hand in large group discussions and had answers which were on topic. She said he was “still in his own little world and he can get distracted by himself,” but he was now aware there were other children in the room. Apparently his parents also noticed immediate
differences at home as well. The team meeting concluded with the counselor saying they would “continue on.”

**Miranda**

During the same Child Study Team meeting, when the team had finished discussing Seth, they moved into a conversation about another of Ann’s students, Miranda. I couldn’t tell from the conversation whether or not they had discussed Miranda previously and the counselor only reviewed Miranda’s home life. She did say Miranda “usually gets it right,” was a “slow worker,” and “mom and dad are having some problems that might be affecting her.” The counselor stated mom had shared with her that dad had problems in school and that mom was doing some work with her at home.

Ann elaborated about Miranda’s academic situation. Ann’s teaching partner, Joan, reported she was working on a Supplemental in mathematics with Miranda and Ann reported:

She’s succeeding. She can now recognize her numbers up to one hundred that she could not do before. And she’s also writing her numbers up to one hundred. So she is doing well with a Supplemental and she is picking up skills she is targeting. Reading-wise we can decide what we would like to do. She is getting Title I [reading help].

Ann continued reporting what the Title One reading teacher told her about Miranda’s strengths and weaknesses. Miranda’s reading strengths included the ability to blend sounds together, her desire to read and write, and how “she can go from car to far to star. She can change the beginning sounds and make new words.” The weak areas as told to Ann by the reading teacher were “her reversals” and “writing and reading the b and d big time.” Another weak area was her Word Wall words; they were “hard for her.” Her
confidence level is weak when "she sounds out a word, she does the beginning sound but then it’s just kind of—she’s not sure where to go from there."

The counselor questioned whether or not Miranda had mentioned her family situation and Ann said she had not heard anything about it in the last month. From that comment Ann moved right into reporting Miranda’s *Iowa Test of Basic Skills* scores. She said, “National [normed score] is, like I said, Vocabulary is 2.7, but I just, I don’t know. Word reading, just like words 1.0; Comprehension 1.4; with a total of 1.2; Word analysis 1.2; where Math was 1.7 and 2.2.” Ann believed Miranda’s mother was helping at home and this made a difference for Miranda:

Mom is helping a lot at home right now—really working. For read for fun, I’m sending three books home that are in her level every Friday. She’s reading those plus four other ones at home. So she’s reading a total of seven books at home a week, I know that much. That’s what is reported on the sheet brought back to me. So she’s got the reading happening at home, she also has math facts that she’s getting sent home and she’s practicing those at home. Word Wall words, mom’s practicing those at home. We tested her on her Word Wall words, and the last time I could do that—I’m not sure where she is at now that we’ve been working a little more, you know, harder on them. . . I don’t know if we want to do more like—should I be doing skills in the classroom where I’m pulling her back with a Supplemental, or if I do that, do we now consider an Intensive? She’s one that I think extra help will help. But she’s doing, I mean she’s doing pretty good. Bonnie[special education teacher] is—we’re doing the co-teaching and Bonnie is doing—she’s in Bonnie’s group right now but Bonnie is feeling she’s getting past where the group is. . .”

The counselor commented if Miranda was doing okay and was succeeding with the Supplemental, then Ann “would need to change the Supplemental.” Ann would need to change it to “something harder.” There was a clarification on the mathematics Intensive Plan which Ann felt should continue as it was written, but she was wondering about the reading and what she should do for a new Supplemental in that area. The counselor told her for reading she “could talk to [the Title One reading teacher] or figure it out on your
own.” Then she offered the idea, “is she low on Word Wall words or whatever.” Ann thought Miranda was “pretty good” at her sight words although she hadn’t tested her lately.

The counselor then wondered again how Miranda was doing on her sight words. She said, “I’m amazed. If kids know sight words, as you teachers know, but, you know they can get so much further if we can minimize it. That’s my vote.” Ann agreed and the counselor continued, “I think she learned them and I think she memorized them. I don’t know if keeping them in their brains and everything, maybe but, I bet mom would really help them. Ann said:

    Exactly, they are. And we talked about how to do—I talked to mom about how to take seven known words and seven unknown words and not just doing the unknown words ‘cause she gets frustrated. And she said, oh yeah, she would do that.

The counselor thought that was a good idea because then it “wouldn’t take so much of your time. I mean you are anyway, but if mom’s working on them at home then that can be a partnership.”

Ann was going to write a new Supplemental for Miranda focusing on “Word Wall words.” She asked the team, “If mom’s working on them at home, could I then be working on them three days a week instead of all five?” The counselor replied, “Yeah, you don’t have to—you are thinking Intensive is what you are thinking about in your brain.” Ann reflected on that for a moment and said, “I know.” She continued, “Well, I can commit to three days a week because I can easily do that with my schedule right now.” So the team concluded by deciding that Miranda should get supplemental support
for Word Wall recognition from Ann three days a week. The team did not discuss Miranda for the remainder of the year.
As I began the analysis of the two cases previously presented, I was reminded that as a qualitative researcher, I was not out to "discover reality" in the teachers' classrooms, but rather to recognize a plurality of ways to understand the world of teaching. I present my interpretation of what I have seen and heard with that in mind. The evidence on which I made my judgments and interpretation was compelling, yet not absolutely certain, as "we cannot ever be certain of having found Truth" (Eisner, 1998, p.109). However, the recurrent behavior and comments of both teachers inspired confidence that my interpretations and judgments were not idiosyncratic but rather characteristic of these teachers.

Lynn and Ann were required to use the new special education referral system, called Instructional Decision Making (IDM), if they had students they thought might need special education support. The data revealed that Lynn and Ann referred students who caused them the most problems in terms of their time and energy. This was typical of what researchers have found with referrals in the past (Gerber & Semmel, 1984; Gottlieb, J., Gottlieb, B.W., & Wishner, 1994; Yssledyke, et.al.,1983). With the new process, not only were teachers still referring their "problem" students, but doing so allowed teachers to find someone else to work with the students before they actually became entitled to special education services.

Instructional Decision Making was modeled after Response to Intervention (RTI), the language used in IDEA (2004) which encouraged the use of scientific, researched-
based interventions as part of the process for determining eligibility for special education services. In the three tiered RTI model, core instruction was to be differentiated for all students, to lessen the need for additional services. The second tier, called Supplemental at Flicker Elementary, was to be targeted group interventions for those students who were at risk, and these interventions were required to be evidenced-based. The third tier was the intensive, individual interventions designed to increase the rate of progress of a student in that tier. At this level, diagnostic assessments of an individual’s skills were to be conducted for the design of effective instruction to remediate the student’s deficits. It was at this tier in the new system that teachers found help for their most problematic students.

Thus, the new special education referral process at Flicker Elementary produced more of the same—“problem” students were still referred into the process; the advantage to the teacher was getting additional help with the problem student sooner, and that help didn’t have to come from the special education teacher. In the Intensive level of instruction, the helper was generally a paraprofessional. The four students Lynn and Ann referred into the system were not found to be entitled to special education during their first grade year, but the student referrals remained open for the future. Nonetheless, Lynn and Ann were partially relieved of the responsibility for their students for a small portion of the day.

The teaching practices and belief systems of Lynn and Ann contributed to the decisions they made regarding their “problem” students. Through a cross-case analysis, I detected some distinct differences between Lynn and Ann’s interpretations of their
respective teaching worlds. Lynn knew there were better ways to teach her students, but admitted she wasn’t doing them. For example, from the literature, Lynn knew of a better way to manage her students, which may have benefited the student she referred for behavior, but she didn’t change her methods because it was working for the rest of her students. She also knew about inclusive practices and had ideas about what she could do, but she didn’t implement them because of the perceived logistical barriers.

Ann, on the other hand, was very careful to express what she thought was the right view, believed she was doing the right thing, but her everyday practices belied that position. She championed inclusion in her daughter’s classroom, yet didn’t include all students in her own room as teacher. Ann implemented the Writers’ Workshop format because it allowed students to write at their individual levels, yet Seth was referred for his inability to perform during the Writer’s Workshop block. Ann also stated she thought the new special education referral system was working nicely, but consistently criticized the requirement of reducing a student’s problem to just one isolated skill.

The commonalities between the two teachers that affected their use of the referral process were more numerous. First, both teachers continued with drill or formulaic interventions even if it was evident those were neither useful nor appropriate for the student. Second, both teachers uniformly applied the same assessments, curriculum, and teaching formats to all students. Third, both teachers adhered to Freire’s (1970) banking concept of education. Fourth, both teachers measured and ranked students, informally and formally.
In the following analysis, I will first examine in detail the differences between Lynn and Ann’s world views and how these views informed their behavior. Second, I will examine in detail their commonalities, which were confirmed through their comments in interviews, team meetings and classroom behaviors. Last, I will provide explanations for why Lynn and Ann viewed and used the referral process as they did.

**Differences in World Views**

**Lynn’s View of Inclusion: A Logistical Problem**

Lynn could be characterized as a committed, kind teacher interested in furthering her own knowledge in the educational field. She has read professional journals, textbooks, and has attended professional development workshops when given the opportunity. Her knowledge and beliefs of various educational concepts appeared to be greater than her implementation of such topics. For instance, Lynn was familiar with Alfie Kohn’s (1993) critique of the use of rewards as a means of controlling student behavior, yet the basic behavior management system she implemented defied his logic. Lynn acknowledged Kohn’s position would be preferable to what she was currently doing but as she stated, “…you do get desperate and willing to try anything which is not good teaching at all but I feel like I’m not getting to teach because of that and so that’s…” She didn’t finish her sentence, but I interpreted her to mean that was why she continued to use the reward system.

She consistently used rewards for achieving one hundred percent on spelling tests, but when a student, such as Emma, failed to achieve one hundred percent and became
disruptive because of it, Lynn blamed the behavior problem on Emma and refused to change her practice, stating:

Then it opens a whole other can of worms sometimes, you know what I mean? When I can see it coming—like the spelling test thing. I'm not willing to budge on that. You don’t get a Snickers unless you get 100 on your test. You know, little things like that...If I give into her on that...

If Lynn had considered discontinuing the practice of such a coveted reward, Emma’s resultant behavior may have diminished if not disappeared altogether. This is one example of Lynn’s knowledge base exceeding her practice, or at least a very decisive disjuncture between what she knows verses what she believes and practices.

Similarly, Lynn was familiar with and had a vague conceptual understanding of the term inclusion. Lynn admitted to the responsibility she and every teacher had for educating all students but she rationalized away that responsibility by saying schools were not set up in such a way for that to happen easily.

I do feel responsible...I do really think that you are—that everyone is responsible for all the education for all the students, and I don’t think that our schools are necessarily set up that way. You know, you shut your door and you are responsible for thirty kids in your room...

She was absolutely correct when she recognized that it was still possible to go into a classroom, shut the door, and feel responsible for only those students sitting in your room. Lortie (1975) argued that teachers retreat to their own classrooms because they can more easily recognize the rewards for their efforts, whereas working for the school as a whole and expending a great amount of effort, often yields minimal rewards. Flicker Elementary was organized for classroom retreat. Special education classrooms and general education classrooms could be found which allowed for separation, segregation,
and retreat into the familiar. One could say exclusion of certain students was "structuralized" or built into the system and Lynn recognized that barrier.

Lynn knew students with special needs were to be included in her classroom with their classmates and as a teacher she was responsible for knowing the students’ goals and supporting them. However, in practice, the special needs students who occasionally came into Lynn’s classroom sat on the periphery of the activities with their paraeducator close by, participating only when the paraeducator would encourage them to do so. By Lynn’s own admission she was not planning for them as she knew she should.

I do know what their [special education students] goals are, yes. But, this is me, I haven’t had time to put some of their stuff together, but I do feel more guilty that I am not meeting their needs as much as I should be.

This thinking forced her into a moral dilemma which she internalized as guilt. Hargreaves (1986b) stated teachers frequently talk about guilt when describing their work. He called Lynn’s guilt, “persecutory guilt,” which arose from failing to do something which was expected by an external authority, in Lynn’s case her principal or a Western Hills employee. She felt guilty for behaving in this way, for not planning and teaching the students as she understood she should, yet she rationalized her guilt away by again (in a tacit sense) blaming the system which has structuralized exclusion by segregating the special needs students into special education classrooms only to return to the general education classrooms when it was least likely to disrupt the teacher’s classroom routine. One might also venture to say the system provided a rationale for Lynn’s not making a more concerted effort. Lynn admitted there were measures she could have employed to enhance inclusion. She stated:
I feel I should be playing a more active role in helping them meet their goals. When they are in my room, and not doing something that may be appropriate for them, I feel like I should have things in my room to help them meet their goals.

She was aware of her identified students’ IEP goals, but she didn’t address them because she didn’t have the time to “put stuff together” for their learning. This left her once again feeling “more guilty” because she knew what needed to be done and yet she wasn’t doing it.

Lynn was taught about the concept of inclusion and the legal requirement for assigning students to the least restrictive environment in her undergraduate studies. She also learned about “full inclusion,” which meant all students were in the general education classroom all the time. What Lynn failed to grasp through her coursework was that inclusion was not about the location of a student during the school day.

...I think when I first learned about it in college, full inclusion, they are in the classroom the whole time and I don’t think I had a really good feel for what that would be like and then—and I am embarrassed to say this—but I think when I was in my earlier years of teaching and I had a child that was special ed, they were pulled out, so it wasn’t at all—they just had support...

Instead of believing inclusion is a place, it should be viewed as recognizing the perspective that human variations are ordinary. As Stiker (1997) so clearly described it, “Difference is not an exception...but something that happens in the natural course of things” (p. 12). The meaning attached to the perceived differences in students has been constructed from a societal definition to determine what is “normal” and what is “abnormal.” Society has constructed labels to distinguish different types of “abnormality.” Lynn’s thinking at the undergraduate level didn’t go deep enough (or perhaps was not prompted to go deep enough) to form a firm foundation for
understanding difference. The continuation of conversing about students through pejorative labels maintains the negative view educators hold about difference (Baglieri & Knopf, 2004).

In her first few years of teaching in a system where exclusion was structuralized, Lynn was able to marginalize the special needs students and place them at the periphery of her planning. As she became a more experienced teacher, she realized the “idea of inclusion is really important” and “I know it is good for all students.” Lynn also knew the pressure was mounting on all the teachers at Flicker Elementary to become more inclusive. She expressed it this way:

...So I do feel it is expected of us, and we are all kind of feeling like we know that we are moving that way, and we are trying to take steps to get ourselves ready. I do think, like I said, reorganization of it, that is what is probably the hardest.

I suspect the reason Lynn felt this added pressure was indirectly related to the alignment of the reauthorization of the Individual Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004 and of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The reauthorization of IDEA became effective July 1, 2005 with the exception of some elements pertaining to the definition of “highly qualified teacher.” With respect to any public elementary or secondary special education teacher teaching a core academic subject area exclusively to children with disabilities, “highly qualified” generally means that the teacher must demonstrate competence in all the core academic subject areas in which the teacher teaches. The special education teacher was required to meet the qualifications as described in Section 612 (a)(14)(A) of IDEA by the end of the 2005-2006 school year. Significant numbers of currently employed special education teachers were not able to meet those
qualifications meaning that these special education teachers did not hold formal state endorsements to teach core academic subjects so school officials met the law by including the students into the core areas of instruction with the teacher co-teaching or supporting the students in some manner. This requirement pushed special education teachers out of their segregated classrooms and into the general education classrooms with their students. This affected the secondary teachers directly, but indirectly the elementary teachers were feeling the push as well. While the concept of a “least restrictive environment” has been required since the passing of Public Law 94-142 (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975), it has been loosely interpreted by educators and parents alike. Students have been largely segregated by their inability to keep up with the classroom teacher’s expectations.

At Lynn’s level, the highly qualified teacher requirement applied in a different way in her state, with elementary special education teachers already being deemed highly qualified (i.e., holding an elementary education endorsement in addition to their special education endorsement) so their practices did not have to change with the law. However, Lynn was feeling pressure coming down from the middle school and high school in her district. The middle school and high school special education students in her district were now being included in general education classes in greater numbers than ever before, with many teachers no longer applying the referral process because it wouldn’t represent a significant change for the student. Why wouldn’t it work the same way at the elementary level? The relationship between the highly qualified teacher requirements and inclusive practices was influencing Lynn’s thinking without her being overtly
conscious of it. From Lynn’s point of view, the elementary system was not embracing inclusion as a system, and therefore she struggled with integrating the concept into the structures at Flicker Elementary.

Another barrier for Lynn was her own belief that the “specialized” knowledge of the special education teacher made her the only one who was able to address the needs of identified special needs students. This was not an uncommon belief. In Logan, Hansen, Nieminen, and Wright’s (2001) study of student support teams, they found general education teachers believed special education teachers were experts in knowing how to work with special education students. Idealizing the special education teacher as someone who has a set of instructional techniques which are inevitably foreign to the general education teachers has removed the motivation and the need for them to develop a wider repertoire of skills, and it reinforces the belief that special education teachers are the only ones who can teach special needs students (Sapon-Shevin, 1996). Lynn envisioned inclusion as a support system from the special education teacher:

Well—like right now—we have a special education teacher working in kindergarten, first and second grades and they all pull out. And she has got this schedule where some kids are coming to her for fifteen to twenty minutes all throughout the day; and so, if they were all fully included in my classroom, then how would I be getting support? Or how would the kindergarten teacher be getting the same support—and the second grade teacher—if there was still just one special education teacher?

She knew there were not enough special education teachers to be in each classroom that had special needs students. Lynn’s caring approach to teaching was to give each student individual support as much as she was able. Her perception of special needs students was that they needed even more one-on-one assistance than regular
education students and thus, it was difficult to do as she was “only one person.” If the special education teacher wasn’t able to support each classroom teacher with the special needs students, then at the very least, Lynn felt she would need more adult help through paraeducator support. From Lynn’s point of view, without additional special education teachers, inclusion could not be fully implemented.

The recurring theme with Lynn and the inclusive concept was that she understood it was good for students, she should be doing it, but she didn’t fully understand how to do it given the structures currently in place. Lynn continued utilizing the system as it was organized because it was too overwhelming for her to meet all students’ needs by herself.

Ann’s Paradoxical Positions

Always the consummate professional teacher, Ann’s performance in the classroom, at team meetings, or in the interviews was one of poise and confidence. She spoke with authority when asked about educational topics or when discussing one of her students. In spite of that, Ann’s teaching practices didn’t always follow the authoritative comments she made. Perhaps that is why I found it confusing to analyze Ann’s responses. Her contradictory accounts and rationalizations made it difficult to understand the connections between her belief system and her practice. I will address the major inconsistencies I found in Ann’s case.

The first inconsistency I struggled to understand was Ann’s conceptual understandings of inclusive practice. The difference between Lynn and Ann’s conceptual understanding was that Lynn felt she was unable to practice inclusion as she should because it was a logistical problem. Ann, on the other hand, found inclusion a positive
experience for children, yet she didn’t embrace it in her own classroom. The fact that she regarded inclusion as a highly worthwhile goal is captured in the following quote:

My daughter is in a second grade classroom right now and she has a severely autistic child in there and the Down’s Syndrome child is in there, and I’m so proud of what they have done with the kids and how loving and accepting they are and how much the special ed kids have learned from the general education kids. They accept them. Kids are so much more accepting than adults are and so they accept them as part of their class completely.

Ann was delighted when her daughter had the opportunity in second grade to attend class with special needs students because she observed the general education students as “loving and accepting” toward the special needs students and believed that the special needs students “have learned from the general education kids. They accept them.” In this statement Ann described the benefits for all students when educated together. She appeared grateful that her daughter had such an experience in second grade.

However, while Ann advocated inclusion for all students in her daughter’s classroom, she went on to explain without an apparent sense of contradiction why she didn’t believe students should be included in her classroom.

It comes to when I’m teaching and even if I’ve adapted it so far past where that child is, then I feel like that’s when the child should be pulled out for that amount of time to get the skills that they really need to get, instead of trying to always bring the lesson down to them because that’s a lot of time not appropriate. It’s not what they need.

This quotation illustrated a serious contradiction in Ann’s thinking. On the one hand, Ann implied that the reason low-achieving students cannot be accommodated in her classroom was because she could not (or should not?) lower the level of instruction too much. One might venture to say the reason she could not was because she felt it
would not be "fair" to the other students. In any event, it was something she could not do. On the other hand, she invokes the low-achieving student's needs, thus passing the "problem" off on the child under the pretense that meeting that child's needs in her classroom was not, after all, what the child needed. This came across as very tortured logic, and one suspects the point of it was to provide a seemingly benign justification for her practices. Ultimately, the origin of the problem was shifted to the student away from Ann.

However, there were times throughout the day when Ann had students who were, in her mind, "totally included." The writing block was one of those times. At this time all students focused on their writing skills. Ann implemented a Writer's Workshop format so "kids could be at whatever level they need to be at." Writers' Workshop is a popular term for the process approach to writing. Students are able to choose a topic, write about it, share what they have written, edit it, revise it and then publish what they have written (Cunningham, Moore, Cunningham, & Moore, 2004). This format recognizes that all students do not learn at the same pace or need the same skills at the same time. The format is also teacher-friendly in that it allows students to work at whatever level they need without a great deal of planning or preparation from Ann. The Writer's Workshop is a format which should work for all students at any level of development by Ann's own admission.

It didn't work for Seth however, the student in her class who was placed in the referral system for writing difficulties. Ann stated:

Since writing [written expression] is a big problem, we sat down and decided what we can do to help him in that area and came up with a couple of things that I
would like to try and I’m not sure if we want to write this into a Supplemental or how exactly that is all going to go.

Seth was brought to the Child Study Team for discussion because in Ann’s words, “his writing was a big problem.” The team supported Ann’s idea of creating a Supplemental plan for Seth in the area of written expression. The Writer’s Workshop was implemented and valued by Ann because it allowed students to work at various “levels,” yet Seth was placed on a Supplemental plan for written expression in part because he was unable to get his thoughts down on paper.

I reflected on this second inconsistency—Ann’s belief that each student could participate in writing because work could be done on an individual level and the fact that one of her students was failing in his writing class. As I did, I wondered if perhaps Seth’s problem was not writing but something else. During the team meeting, Ann led the team into the solution she had for Seth. Ann described her plan:

At school we are going to try these wordless books with him and they are just books that are laid out and this is called My Day and it is a picture of him getting up, a picture of him eating breakfast, brushing his hair, and doing all these different things. We are going to make them into a book...I will make this fun. And then he’s going to write a sentence to go with the pictures and then we can see if we can get that sequence of events kind of happening in his brain and see if he can actually do that.

Giving him wordless books was to spur his thinking and give him something about which to write. The special education teacher questioned the creativity loss that seemed to be inherent in the wordless books and story starters. She suggested an activity which would be more creative, but Ann dismissed the idea saying he couldn’t come up with any ideas of his own. From a micropolitical perspective, Ann was able to exercise considerable influence and control over this team because the structure allowed her to
be in charge (Blase, 1988), she was able to achieve her preferred outcome by exerting her individual will. Ann had a plan for Seth and she was not willing to alter that plan even when suggestions from others were offered.

I wondered if Seth’s problems with writing could have been motivational. If he were allowed to write about whatever was on his mind, whether or not it met with teacher approval, he might have revealed his true writing ability. Unfortunately, there was the unspoken fact that teachers clearly favored certain ways of doing things and Seth didn’t conform to Ann’s expectations, despite her use of the flexible Writer’s Workshop format.

At this point, one might well question who had the “problem.” By Ann’s own admission, Seth’s academic skills were good. The central problem then seemed to be that Seth was “in his own world” meaning that he did not keep up with Ann’s teaching agenda. She had expectations for Seth, but he was not meeting them.

The third inconsistency I found was in Ann’s struggle with the reductionism required of the new special education process and her need to look at the whole child. The Supplemental and Intensive plans which were written for a student required teachers, like Ann, to identify a student’s particular skill deficit, select an intervention to address the deficit, and then track the progress on that one skill. For instance, a targeted skill might be increasing the number of correct word sequences Seth would write, but that didn’t address his organization or sequential problems in writing. Ann was disturbed with the mandated isolation of a skill, because there were many different skill deficits needing to be addressed in any child.

Sometimes you miss the whole child. You get so specific on having to look at something and chart it and show that they are making progress and we have to be
able to test it in order to show that and you can’t test all the abilities the child can do. When I am teaching, I am looking at the whole child. I am looking at life skills. I am looking at reading. I am looking at everything that the child is made up into being. It’s just not about whether or not this child can perform this well on a test…

In her words, she would rather look at the “whole child,” than select a specific skill deficiency.

Nevertheless, when Seth was brought to the Child Study Team, Ann was quite comfortable reducing his deficits down to his inability to write a thought on paper. Despite her criticism of reductionism in our interviews, no such comments were made in the team meetings. The team discussion didn’t focus on Seth as a “whole child,” such as how he was doing in other subject areas, his background, his medication, socialization and school performance in general. His strengths were not mentioned so that the team could build upon those. Rather, his problem was reduced to his inability to write a story and develop his characters. This contradicted her criticism of the special education reductionist drive imposed on her by the system for identifying students for special education because she supported the reductionist thinking herself when she brought Seth to team.

An ancillary concern, while not a contradiction per se, shed a bright light on Ann’s use of the referral process. Despite her distaste for the reductionist emphasis on the evaluation of isolated skills, she praised Supplementals and Intensives as “good attributes” of the new process. Specifically, she liked “the fact that they are working with the child for fifteen minutes on something” [emphasis mine]. What she approved of was having someone else working with the student, reductionistic or not.
During the same interview and in the same response to the effectiveness of Instructional Decision Making, she indicated Supplementals were activities teachers were already doing, but now, with the new system, “you have to fill out a paper to say that you are doing something with a child.” Here is what she said:

I think, overall, it is working nicely. It has good attributes of Supplementals and Intensives, and I do like the fact that they are working with the child for fifteen minutes on something—or whatever that happens to be when it gets to the Intensive. But Supplemental, you know in my room—I am not sure what all the other teachers are like you know, doing in their room—but I think Supplementals are things teachers are already doing, they just now made, you know, now fill out a paper and say that you are doing it with a child. It’s things you would do, I think, naturally. Now maybe, in another classroom, it wouldn’t be done naturally and maybe that is why they’re considered Supplemental because maybe some teachers don’t just naturally make those accommodations for children that are having problems.

She attributed the reason for this accountability to the possibility that other teachers might not be doing the same things she was doing “just naturally,” therefore she implied the whole system might have changed because of the teachers who didn’t accommodate for children having problems.

When examining more closely her thoughts about Intensive plans, which she initially described as a “good attribute,” she went on to say, in the same response, that finding the time herself to do an Intensive plan was hard.

Then the Intensive, that is something that I probably haven’t done as much of in my classroom, you know, actually setting aside that much time for a child to do. The only problem with that is finding time. It’s been nice, you can use other teachers besides yourself, because we simply, you know, because to say I’m going to sit down ten or fifteen minutes with a child while the rest of the kids are in there is kinda hard. You sometimes can make it work and sometimes you can’t.
She liked the fact that she could “use other teachers” because she didn’t know how she could sit down with a child for ten to fifteen minutes and help that individual student while the rest of the children were in the room. This reference, I believe, was to the special education teacher who implemented some of the Intensive plans. Ann went on to say, “Sometimes you can make it work and sometimes you can’t.” She then referred back to the major flaw in the new system, that being the reductionism and progress monitoring required on a measurable skill rather than taking into account the whole child.

I do not wish to condemn Ann for her inconsistent thoughts. She was a dedicated teacher working hard to meet the needs of students as best she could. On the surface, she appeared confident and knowledgeable. Yet, upon closer examination, Ann’s comments did not “add up” when it came to implementation. I suspect that Ann chose the narrative she saw as appropriate based on the context and was completely unaware of her inconsistencies. There was no time in the teachers’ day for scholarly reflection and practice, nor does society expect it of them (Giroux, 1993).

**Commonalities Between Lynn and Ann**

**Bound by Their Own Teaching Practices**

Lynn and Ann were both trapped in certain teaching practices, even when they were aware of other pedagogical practices which might be more effective for some of their students. Familiar instructional methods were continued by both teachers even though they yielded minimal progress for the students. According to Lortie (1975), uncertainty and the anxiety commonly associated with teacher individualism leads
teachers to “rely on orthodox doctrines and their own past experience as students when forming their styles and strategies of teaching” (p.54). Each teacher adhered to teaching practices which were comfortable and familiar to her. The teaching practices were not effective for the “problem” students, which resulted in them being referred into the special education system. This allowed the teachers to continue what they knew how to do and, in addition, find outside help for the students who were costing them extra time and energy.

The first example of an instructional method that Lynn continued even when it was not achieving the intended goal was the repeated practice of drilling Colin on Word Wall words. It is not true that students must learn to recognize high frequency words before being able to read for understanding (Duffy, 2003); it makes a great deal more sense to learn to read by reading for understanding. But the drilling of a skill, such as recognizing sight words in a “factory-like approach is so unappealing that many students come to hate school…” (Kohn, 1999, p.55). Kohn (1999) continues to argue there is no pedagogical justification for such a practice. This proved to be true in Colin’s case. The drilling of Word Wall words didn’t yield an increase in his reading scores as reported by Lynn:

...I do think, you know, they have been working on sight words [Word Wall words] and then the ones he missed before. So I gave her [the associate] both things to do. I tried to give him flash cards, I kind of gave her some creative, you know, to play around a bit...I do think, as far as progress, I have seen, um, his weekly Word Wall words have gone up since we started this, like he’s um, he’s gotten one hundred several weeks or...he missed one. He knows them pretty fast. Doesn’t need to struggle with or sound them out, I mean he is just like a child that has practiced and knows his words, um and that has gone up...As far as the whole purpose we were doing this, we were hoping that if he knew more words, that his reading level would go up and then, in turn, his test scores would go up. I haven’t
seen so much transfer over his weekly test go, they still are pretty um, 43 percent, 63 percent.

It is not uncommon for teachers to break down the reading process into smaller, isolated subcomponents, such as the Word Wall words, and assess them separately from the whole reading process. When reading is reduced to isolated words its ability to gain meaning from any text is lost. Drilling sight words “decontextualize and abstractly separates reading and other school subjects from the ongoing activities of everyday life that give them their meaning and purpose” (Iano, 1990, p.463.) In rote memorization activities, the opportunity for the construction of meaning by the student is not present. It was no surprise, then, that Colin’s success at Word Wall words made no significant improvement in his reading comprehension, as measured by weekly tests.

What the team also failed to consider was a probable lack of motivation behind Colin’s reading progress. One of the most important aspects of motivation in learning to read is self-efficacy. “Self-efficacy refers to beliefs the person has about his or her capabilities to learn or perform at designated levels” (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997, p.34). The research on self-efficacy suggests that if students like Colin “have doubts about their ability to learn something they are less likely to try to learn it in the first place and more likely—they will give up easily when they encounter difficulty” (Cunningham et. al., 2004, p.10). Teachers need to build the students’ self confidence when they are struggling, and young children like Colin are very dependent upon their teachers to help them get there. It is a very common mistake to forget to ask students what it is that interests them and what sort of teaching methods make the most sense to them (Kohn, 1999). Rather the adults continue to try and figure out what to do to students.
If the team wanted Colin to recognize sight words in the actual context of reading, then teaching them in the actual context of reading would be an alignment of teaching practice and assessment practice. A study conducted by Lutz, Guthrie, and Davis (2006) found that students who were in classes which showed strong growth in reading comprehension were also in classes where students showed engagement in complex literacy tasks. The drilling of individual sight words does not constitute a complex literacy task.

The same study also suggested that if there was a pattern of scaffolding employed by the teachers, it would increase students’ engagement in complex tasks, which would translate into increased achievement gains. Lynn and Ann, like many teachers, were not familiar with such research studies and therefore resorted to what they currently knew how to do, such as drilling the students on sight words. It appeared the reductionistic behavioral learning theory was the basis for designing interventions for Lynn and Ann’s students (Fields & Tarlow, 1996). Rather, if Lynn and Ann were adhering to the holistic/constructivist principles of learning, they would be designing interventions which would help their students develop new meanings to new experiences (Poplin, 1988a). If holistic learning is broken down in a reductionistic manner, the “meaningfulness of the learning situation is so far removed from where the student lives that the natural process of generalization and the internal motivation to learn ‘school things’ at school are destroyed in the process” (Rettinger, Waters, & Poplin, 1989, p.310).

It would have been surprising if continually drilling on sight words, in isolation, led to any increase in Colin’s reading ability, because it was likely there was no meaning
for him; and therefore generalizing word recognition to reading for meaning did not occur (a well-recognized problem with reductionist teaching practices). To a behavior theorist, it may seem logical to break the reading process down into simpler pieces, but to a first grader, it is far more natural and effective for the whole to come before the part (Kohn, 1999).

Unfortunately, students who are “at-risk,” low-achievers, or slow learners usually are the ones who are forced into infinitely dull and repetitive skills instruction that does not enable them to grasp the underlying concepts. Drilling isn’t teaching. When students are forced into doing something repeatedly that they don’t know how to do, sometimes it makes them feel stupid or angry. A drill such as sight word recognition does not allow thinking to develop. The focus for Colin should have been on reading and thinking, not on producing the right answers on the criterion-referenced test. Drill and rote memorization have been found to be the least effective, most primitive approaches to learning (Chenoweth, 2005; Kamii, 1985; Kohn, 1999; Novak, 1993), yet Lynn continued to use drill to address Colin’s lack of reading sophistication. One reason for that, as mentioned above, might have been that anxiety and uncertainty encourages the use of the familiar.

Poplin (1988b) has suggested that teachers are encouraged to use reductionistic practices. Not only have they been trained in reductionistic practices in their teacher education programs, but principals find it easier to assess teachers who use these practices. What struck me, in my observations, was that teachers actually benefit from using these practices because it allows them to transfer the task to a paraeducator.
Regardless of whether or not the non-licensed paraeducator is capable of more complex assistance, it is more convenient to the teacher to assign a task that requires minimal preparation. It seemed to work, because the paraeducator was as familiar with these practices as the teachers: they, like all of us, experienced drill and practice in school when they were students. So it was familiar to them and within their ability and understanding.

A second practice which Lynn continued, even though it was not working for Colin, was the continuance of administering the criterion-referenced publisher reading assessments in the same way to all students. Colin’s reading abilities were based on his performance on Houghton Mifflin’s assessment which accompanied the first grade reading series. Showing low performance in reading, Lynn placed Colin in the referral process. She shared the average weekly reading test scores with the Child Study Team:

First quarter his average was 67 percent, the class average was 77 percent.
Second quarter his average again was 66 percent and the class average was 77 percent. Third quarter so far, his average is 52 percent so I feel like it is getting harder.

Lynn also reported to the Child Study Team that Colin got “really frustrated” with his slow pace when others finished more quickly.

I will say he gets really frustrated when others get done because he is thinking—when he has done three, he [the other student] has done the whole test...He whines and moans and is yelling at the other kids because they didn’t read...

Lynn was not able to change the assessment because it was required by the district. The administration of the assessments, however, was left to her discretion. Knowing the purpose of the assessment was to determine Colin’s reading abilities, not how fast he completed it, team members encouraged Lynn to consider changing the administration of
the test. Lynn responded by saying, “And I do think, you know, during his weekly test, I am, like, kind of open to how can I adapt it.” While she stated she was open to the idea, she really didn’t know how to go about doing so, evidenced by another such attempt, earlier in the year. She reflected:

In the beginning I tried to adjust Colin’s [assessment], but then I have the problem of where I have kids who are sitting for fifteen minutes waiting for a child who is just on—what? I have so many attention problems in my room. Then that is not fair. I really feel like it has turned into, you know, most kids are done in twenty-five minutes and I’ve got seven kids who take a lot longer. So I have been just trying different things to get it done. You know, Colin, I’ll have him sit right next to me and read different parts to me, you know, and then I’ll have others trying on their own.

Lynn’s inability to manage the varying completion times made her reluctant to look for another way to support Colin. This was an example of micropolitical behavior from Lynn. Mentioning the problem allowed Lynn to reject other changes to her testing, which allowed her to achieve her preferred outcome (Blasé, 1988). Have someone else work with Colin and practice taking “old tests.” Lynn explained her plan:

I would like...that the change be that they would just go through some old tests, do you know what I mean, to kind of get him to see that he is quite capable of reading them to get him to read them independent doing his weekly tests...

I suspect Lynn was thinking if Colin were more familiar with the format and successful with easier tests, he might complete the weekly assessment in a more timely manner thereby decreasing his frustration and hers at the same time.

Uniform use of curriculum materials, regardless of the students’ needs was a third example of a practice that Lynn and Ann continued, even when it was ineffective with some of their students. Colin was struggling to read the Houghton Mifflin reading material, and Lynn was not utilizing small group guided reading instruction. Guided
reading occurs when a teacher guides some students, using an activity designed to help them apply skills and strategies to increase their understanding of the text (Cunningham et.al., 2004). There were guided reading materials available to her but she hadn’t incorporated them into her teaching day. Instead, Lynn taught the basal reader to the whole group of first graders. When Lynn brought Colin to Team, there was no discussion of any curriculum changes for him, such as offering reading materials that interested him or were at his independent reading level.

Flicker Elementary was fairly typical when it came to curriculum expectations. The school had just purchased the new reading series the year before this study, and teachers were expected to follow the teacher manual at their grade level. Books were used which accompanied the teacher’s manual as well as the purchased assessments mentioned above. This uniform policy fosters a linear approach to learning that belies the complexity of real learning. Such linearity is evidenced by students marching through grade level materials during the year, pacing the material so it is completed by year’s end. Learning consists of constructing understanding of how the world functions in some way; new information may or may not transform that understanding. The quality of the learning is not a function of where the student “ends up” (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). Colin didn’t construct an adequate understanding of reading for meaning. One wonders if he might have benefited more from a holistic/constructivist approach which encourages the teacher to plan her instruction from life related activities (such as literacy and cooperative learning) than from school related activities (such as reading basals and performance on reductionistic subskills; Poplin, 1988b).
This uniformity of thinking was also seen with Ann’s student, Seth. He expressed an interest in certain topics, including video games, movies, and cartoons, which Ann found difficult to understand because she wasn’t familiar with the characters he would describe; he also wrote questions, including “what if dogs read snakes?” which Ann understood no more than anyone else. Without probing into such written statements, it would have been difficult to know what Seth was thinking. Was he being silly or creative with such a comment? Even if Ann would have engaged in a conversation with Seth when he wrote such unusual statements, she might not have gained information about his writing skills. However, not talking in depth with him about what he did write, allowed Ann’s perception of Seth’s problems to go unchallenged. Perhaps if she allowed him to write about characters from his video games and movies, she might have been better able to determine if he was learning how to write. When the student’s point of view is considered and understood, then the teacher is better able to determine if the student has grasped the intended teaching concepts (Kohn, 1999).

Ann’s practice of implementing the Writers’ Workshop in a format she was comfortable with perhaps prevented her from using the method successfully to increase Seth’s writing skills. Successful writing instruction, of course, is not limited to the Writer’s Workshop approach. Writing is learned through a variety of activities. In many primary classrooms, a teacher may record the students’ ideas on chart paper as they watch the teacher write (Cunningham et.al., 2004). One way students learn to write is by watching the teacher write down her words and then read them back to her. This was not to suggest that some other method was better than the Writer’s Workshop, but that the
use of a variety of methods with different students might be better than a single method for all.

The teaching practices detailed above were ineffective for these students and contributed to the decision to refer them into the special education process. All of them, reading out of context, using published assessments, and uniformly applying curriculum materials and methods, were properly part of core instruction, which was the first tier of the RTI model. So, from the first step of Flicker Elementary’s implementation of the RTI model, it was not done as intended.

At Flicker, severe student deficits were sometimes a reason for referral, which made a student’s weaknesses a primary focus. In a holistic/constructivist approach, teachers should consider students’ weaknesses and their strengths, by designing meaningful experiences around who they are, that are aimed at improving students’ weaknesses (Poplin, 1988a). If teachers were able to make a change to that type of approach, the need to undergo the eligibility process would be moot.

In the present context of No Child Left Behind (2001) and IDEA (2004) it would be difficult for teachers to change to a holistic/constructivist approach to teaching. These federal mandates require evidenced based practices, which are inevitably reductionistic. The requirement for interventions based on “scientific” (empiricist) research only works when the “testing” is done through prescribed (reductionistic) teaching practices and curriculum materials. The RTI process, then, which was at the center of the referral process required teachers to use evidenced based practices to gather data from their implementation. The basal series assessments, which required reductionistic data
collection to prove students were progressing also drove the type of instruction Lynn and Ann employed. Therefore, while Lynn and Ann continued to implement teaching practices that were not effective for all students, they did so, not only to further their own agenda, but also because they were teaching in a social and political context which required them to do so.

Making Deposits

Another commonality between Lynn and Ann was their adherence to a concept Freire (1970) referred to as the "'banking' concept of education" (p.72). This concept of education, as Freire described it, was knowledge which was "bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (p.72). When it came to the content students were to learn, Lynn and Ann scheduled and planned the content for the day. The teachers' act of planning the content of the learning for their students represents the "depositing" of predetermined information into the students' brains described in Freire's concept. The concept also encompasses the teacher-student relationship, portraying it as more narrative than conversational in exploring concepts. While I didn't calculate the ratio or the percentages of "teacher talk" to "student talk" during the observations I made in both classrooms, I can confidently say the teachers were talking the majority of the time with students responding to the questions asked.

Further, Freire's concept views the teacher's task as "filling" the students with the content of the teacher's narrations. The students are seen as "containers" or "receptacles" to be filled by the teacher. From Lynn or Ann's perspective, a good teacher was one that
filled brains of the students or "receptacles" completely and have it "stick." As Freire describes the "receptacles," the more meekly the students permit themselves to be "filled" the better students they are. Freire's concept has also been referred to as the "jug and mug" model: stuff is poured from the big container into the little ones (Kohn, 1999).

References Lynn and Ann made that convinced me this was how each viewed her role as a teacher were scattered throughout my data collection. In interviews and in team meetings each teacher referred to "getting into the brain," what they wanted the students to learn. Ann wanted Seth to write a story about the pictures she gave him to "see if we can get that sequence of events kind of happening in his brain." Lynn planned her lessons "trying to get into their brain as many different modalities as possible." In one meeting, the school counselor referred to "keeping them [sight words] in their brains." This approach to learning, a brain waiting to be filled with information from the teachers, influences decision making about why a student is or is not learning. If they are not learning, there must be a pathological reason. The brain is not receiving information as it should. Education has then become an act of depositing information into students by teachers who are the depositors (Freire, 1970).

Another example of Lynn and Ann's adherence to the banking concept of education was the heavy reliance on the transmission of reading skills through direct or indirect instruction. From their daily routines to the messages up on the classroom walls, there was a sense that knowledge about reading must be memorized and learned by the students. Each teacher had a Word Wall, with words to be learned in isolation and
posters scattered about the classroom walls focusing on different reading concepts such as word families or rhyming words.

It was not unreasonable for teachers to have adopted, without realizing it, the banking concept of education. Equally, it was not unreasonable to anticipate that teachers believed this was part of their role. As teachers, they came to understand they were responsible for imparting predetermined information to their students. That was the role society expected of them and both Lynn and Ann were striving to meet that challenge. Both teachers, as former students in K-12 classrooms, have listened to teachers lecture at them year after year. Thus, it was natural for them to think that was the role of the teacher (Lortie, 1975). On the other hand, if Lynn and Ann had never had the opportunity to think about how learning happens, it would be quite reasonable for them to assume that a teacher, who knows more than the students, should simply tell them what she knows (Kohn, 1999). In Lynn’s words:

I just recently took a class, an Orton Gillingham class, and I do think it taught me a lot of phonics things I didn’t know, that I obviously just figured out at some point in my life...And so this year I have done a much better job at teaching kids what the rules are...I think a lot of teachers don’t know all the rules. And I just think that why make the kids try to figure out on their own? I just give them...

Lynn thought she was doing the right thing by giving students the information she had and they didn’t. Lynn was teaching the best way she knew how.

This banking concept of education was in contrast with another theory that purports teachers need to create a structure for students to hook new information onto old information. Students needed to construct their own meanings and ways to learn. People do not learn by acquiring information. They learn by constructing and reconstructing
new and richer meanings based on what they already know (Rettinger et.al., 1989). The constructivist theory of learning was not in Lynn nor Ann’s repertoires as far as I knew, because everything I heard and observed demonstrated that they viewed their students as “containers” to be filled. I saw no sign of instructional methods grounded in the constructivist theory of learning.

Because Lynn and Ann approached teaching from a “depositor/deposited” position, one can begin to understand their conceptual understanding of disability as a pathological problem. Lynn defined disability as “not learning” in comparison to peers. She also recognized that the label terminology which described a student’s learning problem was no longer discussed with parents, but as she stated, “It [the problem] didn’t go away... It has always been there, we just call it something different.”

Ann believed that learning is additive, and that students who didn’t receive the information she had provided required additional support. With the new referral process, students had to be assessed for the purpose of special education in order to receive that additional support. Lynn and Ann were working very hard to get their students to receive information, memorize it, and repeat it when necessary. From their perspective, if what they were trying to teach didn’t eventually stick in the student’s brain, something must be
“wrong” with the student and a referral to the special education process was made. The banking concept of education reinforced teachers’ thinking in that the “problem lay clearly with the students’ aberrant processing of information” (Poplin, 1988b, p.394).

**Measured and Ranked**

Measuring and ranking students was another commonality for Lynn and Ann encouraged, in part, by the requirements at Flicker Elementary. The measuring and ranking of students was partially evident by examining the materials in their classrooms. Both teachers had leveled readers from their new reading series. Plastic containers held the readers and were labeled: below level, on level, and above level. Other books were found in the classrooms which appeared to be leveled as well. Ann’s classroom had books with colored stickers on them indicating different reading levels.

Students themselves were measured and ranked against one another. For example, in the Stepping Stone Program flexible grouping of students according to age, ability, and/or interest was promoted. Ann explained it as a positive attribute of the program:

> We don’t do a lot of going back from second grade down to first grade but when they get into third and fourth, they do a lot more mixing because we feel kids can handle it better—the kind of shuffling around and those two classrooms are truly multi-age. The desks in one room are third and fourth grade desks and the desks in the other room are third and fourth grade desks. When they do reading, each teacher does sometimes a third grade level and she’s got a fourth grade level in their room so the kids really have no idea where they are at—more in the third and fourth grade room.

Even though Ann was describing the third and fourth grade classrooms here, the students in her program were in the Stepping Stone program. The program itself was only available to a limited number of students. All students attended the traditional
kindergarten program and then parents made “their choice of where to go” according to Ann. The kindergarten teachers knew the students by the end of the year and had some influence with parents as to whether or not their child would be most successful in the Stepping Stone program or in Lynn’s program.

The real difference in the Stepping Stone program, according to Ann, was the fact that all teachers were teaching reading and math at the same time. This scheduling allowed Ann to send a child who was “farther advanced” beyond her curriculum to another teacher’s classroom for instruction at a higher level. So, without conscious thought, the Stepping Stone multi-age philosophy had strengthened the measuring and ranking system so engrained in teachers’ minds. This was not to say multi-age grouping was wrong as long as students were grouped according to something other than their perceived ability. Grouping students according to their interest in a particular learning project for example, does have its merits. As long as the groups remain flexible and students are not tracked based on their “ability,” it is an acceptable model for grouping children (Mallery & Mallery, 1999; Marsh & Raywid, 1994; Oakes, 1985;).

As Skrtic (1991) pointed out, teachers have a “finite repertoire of standard programs that are applicable to only a finite number of client needs” (p.110). The professional (teacher) screens out heterogeneity by squeezing all student needs into one of their standard programs or sending them to a colleague’s standard program. This was accommodated easily through the Stepping Stone program if the student was performing above grade level expectations. It did not however, work in the opposite direction.
Lynn, who was not teaching in the Stepping Stone program, was given her class roster at the beginning of the year. Once Lynn received her class roster, she too employed her own methods of measuring and ranking. This was evident in her understanding of disabilities. Lynn explained it like this:

I think that there are certainly kids who are not learning for one reason or another...I think that if you are not learning that is a disability, you are not able to do something that maybe your peers are...

Lynn was measuring and ranking the students, not in a deliberate, formal manner, but informally to find those who were not performing like their peers. Occasionally teachers have been heard to comment about a student who had been referred for special education as being at the “bottom of the class.”

Measuring and ranking was inherent in the current special education referral process. The process was initiated by teachers who perceived a student as not performing at grade level and required more time and energy than she felt she could give to them.

Ann explained the current referral process:

The procedure is, at first, if the teacher feels there is a need for this child—they aren’t quite performing up to grade level—they start out with a Supplemental plan and that’s just changing some way you are teaching...

The teacher had a “feeling” according to Ann, based on her experiences of what typical children should be accomplishing at the core level. If they were not “performing up to grade level,” a clear indication that some sort of measurement and ranking of students had to be considered, the students were placed on a Supplemental plan. The decision to place a student on a Supplemental plan necessitated a further decision: The target skill needed to be determined. In Ann’s rendition of the process, the target skill was
Another practice Lynn and Ann were required to adhere to was the administration of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). The scores from this standardized test were shared at a Child Study Team meeting for both Lynn’s and Ann’s students. Ann shared the Iowa Test of Basic Skills scores for Seth. His total reading score, as indicated on that test, was 2.6 but his vocabulary score was at the kindergarten level. Ann seemed confused by the apparent contradiction in these scores her students received on ITBS. She stated:

It’s just what words you have heard in life, like a window sill. It’s like a ledge and it’s just, if you come across those words you will do fine. I have kids that are reading at the third grade level that get kindergarten scores for vocabulary. And then I get a student like Miranda, who we will bring up next, who scored huge on vocabulary but her reading scores are real low.

Ann brought these data to the team for her student Miranda. The scores which were reported were grade equivalent scores such as “vocabulary 2.7” and “word reading...1.0.” Ann used this information as a measurement of how well Miranda was doing in reading and math. The team listened to these data, but for Ann and the rest of the team members they appeared to be of little value other than to confuse them.

During the team meeting for Emma, one of Lynn’s students, Lynn commented that “as far as her academics go, I think she is behind,” which indicated a “measure and rank” mentality. The school counselor reported Emma’s scores and used them to reinforce Lynn’s comment:
Her score was a 1.2 and should have been 1.5. She was in the 34th percentile but she was in the 30's and 40's all the way through. Percentile wise. But what we know about her, one would have expected her to be much higher than that. And her pre-reading test in kindergarten she was 87 percent. I mean she should be in more in those percentiles than in the 30's.

Lynn and Ann were both required to administer the standardized tests to their students. They had no choice in that decision. What they did have more control over was how those scores would be used in the special education referral process. Lynn and Ann could decide whether or not they wanted to bring those data to the team meetings for consideration. Whether or not the data were used in a team meeting, both Lynn and Ann had used the data to inform their opinions about the students they were referring.

Collaboration time was another structural configuration that influenced teacher-decision making and, in turn, encouraged the measurement and ranking of students. Lynn would meet with the other first grade teachers in her program and together they would discuss what they were doing and how far along they were in the new reading program. This placed unwarranted pressure on Lynn to move her students along at the same pace as the others so that all first graders would have completed the same materials. Lynn felt the pressure as she met with her colleagues, and it was reasonable to think that, as a result of her grade level discussion, Lynn was more aware of her students who were falling behind. Ann met with her team of Stepping Stone teachers on a regular basis and discussed students and where they were in relation to others so they could move them around if necessary.

Ann and Lynn's practice of measuring and ranking of students was expected by the district. School administration bought curriculum and testing materials for them to
use which necessitated such practice. "The result of grade-by-grade standards, with their disregard of individual differences, was that some children would be branded as failures because they didn’t learn as quickly as their peers" (Kohn, 1999, p.47). Processes were in place to measure students and compare peers against one another.

The new special education referral process (IDM) was also deliberately constructed to require teachers to measure students against one another throughout the tiers. One of the eligibility criteria for special education was based on the comparison of a student’s performance against that of his or her peers, as well as against the school’s benchmark expectations. The child study teams did not implement this requirement formally. Rather they used the comparison against peers as further evidence there was something "wrong" with the student. Measuring and ranking students, however the school employees chose to do it, deflected the lack of learning away from them and back onto the students. The system allowed them to label their "problem" students by measuring them against their peers to convince the rest of the team members this child needed additional outside support.

A Limited Understanding of the Referral Process

Both Lynn and Ann accepted the current special education referral process but felt it was one that impugns teacher judgment and motive. Lynn felt this way:

As a teacher it is hard because not at all did I think it was intended to be insulting, but it kind of is funny, because you’ve been trying really hard, now try REALLY hard. You know, it kind of, lot of times it’s just adding something extra like they were getting ten minutes and now it’s fifteen…
Ann stated it like this:

I sometimes feel that the eight weeks is not a magic number and with the Supplemental—it’s like we get caught in a numbers game. And if you didn’t do the Supplemental or you didn’t write it down, and it’s like if we didn’t do that for the eight weeks then we can’t go to the Intensive…

Both teachers did not seem to realize the current process was grounded in the legislated Response to Intervention (RTI) movement. The Instructional Decision Making model required at Flicker Elementary was modeled after the Response to Intervention Model, which was given a boost in the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004. It was a strategy to be used in the general education classrooms to monitor children’s progress; and the use of special education was to be used as a strategy after all the other strategies in RTI had been used with struggling learners (National Association of State Directors of Special Education Incorporated & Council of Administrators of Special Education, [NASDSE & CASE], 2006). The success of a model based on RTI required, among other things, high quality instruction, good data collection and interventions that responded to the data with that instruction. Frequently, by the time a federal initiative is understood by educators at the classroom level, an iteration of the original model must be implemented. Because the mandatory implementation precedes understanding, that implementation is often flawed.

Ann had never heard of RTI when I questioned her about it. She laughed and said, “So many initials!” She did not know what the initials stood for and did not have an understanding that her implementation of Supplemental and Intensive plans derived from that larger initiative. The process which Lynn and Ann followed as part of the required special education referral was a version of what the staff interpreted from the Western
Hills Agency. Four years ago prior to this study, the Western Hills agency informed the Flicker Elementary staff about the new special education referral process called Instructional Decision Making, which was patterned after RTI, but Western Hills decided not to refer to that connection. In a very sincere attempt to do what was asked of them using the resources available, the Flicker staff created a process from their interpretation. The failure of that process and its underlying interpretation was based on what they believed about disability and learning. School personnel assumed the student’s problem resided in the student and therefore needed to be “fixed” by someone other than themselves. When beliefs and assumptions have not changed, the solutions to the problems are likely to not change as well. This is what happened at Flicker Elementary. The RTI process encouraged a change in instruction as a means to prevent students entering special education, but because the problem was still seen as residing within the child, the change in instruction was minimally addressed. Therefore, the process didn’t look significantly different from what they had done in the past. As Ann said, “We only have to do more paperwork now.”

Ann’s remark indicated that their whole approach to the new system resembled the “old” referral process. Earlier, when a teacher had a problem with a student, she was to bring the student’s name to a group of individuals which were still called Child Assistant Teams (CAT). The concept for these teams was specified in the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. This act specified that teachers be participants in multidisciplinary meetings held either for evaluation (Section 121a.540) or program planning (Section 121.344). The law also stated that students may be placed in special
education settings by placement teams, which draw upon information from a variety of sources, including teacher recommendations (Ysseldyke et al., 1981).

The function and the work of the CAT team should have changed in the new model from a teacher advocacy model to one of universal screening. Rather than individual teachers bringing one of their own students to the CAT team meeting, the Instructional Decision Making model encouraged the CAT team to analyze all building-wide data pertinent to their grade level and determine which students were most discrepant from others and then intervene with high quality, research based instruction. If this would have been implemented as intended, it might have prevented teachers bringing their own "problem" students to the team.

In addition, if RTI were to be implemented one would see a structured, systematic problem-solving model in place at the general education level and not one created through a special education initiative as was done at Flicker Elementary. The problem-solving process would assist the staff in meeting student learning needs, by identifying the problem, analyzing the problem, and developing a plan of instruction and evaluation to assess whether or not the student has made progress. The assessments in that problem-solving model would be linked to several purposes—screening, diagnostics and progress monitoring. The function of those assessments would be to identify at-risk students as early as possible to gather relevant data in support of improving a student’s learning. (NASDSE & CASE, 2006).

Flicker Elementary had taken the "new" process and unconsciously molded it to fit what they were currently doing. The process remained essentially the same: More
documentation was required, vocabulary was changed and timelines and deadlines were added. Ann described it in this way:

...They start out with a Supplemental plan and that’s just changing some way that you are teaching. Maybe pulling that child back for five minutes at a time to talk about that thing, and it’s targeting a certain skill. And you do that for about six or eight weeks and you kind of watch that. And you meet with the CAT teams and evaluate how that is going. If you feel, after the Supplemental is done and it’s working then maybe you better continue with the Supplemental or tweak it a little bit to make it better. But then, at that time, if you feel it’s still not adequate for that child, then we move to the Intensive procedure. That’s when meeting in a big group and we are bringing parents in and talking and deciding what are the skills that the child really needs to target and then it’s written up as an Intensive...After four weeks, you then evaluate that, look at the data, they are being pulled out for probes, once a week they are probed, usually by the Western Hills Agency staff to see how they are doing on the data. And then after four weeks, if it is not working, they change it; if it is working, they continue to do it. And then kind of make a decision after eight weeks how we are to go from there.

Skills at collecting and analyzing data from interventions were not developed by the staff so they were confused at times with what to do with the data presented. The school psychologist had taken Lynn’s data on Emma’s office referrals and put them on a graph. Lynn didn’t understand it so she questioned the psychologist by asking, “So the aim line is what we are supposed to be shooting for, right?” The graph held little meaning relative to Emma’s progress for anyone else at the meeting. As Lynn expressed:

Which to me, 50 percent, for while there, if the aim line is only 50 percent to me that is, I mean, if you are out of there twice a day, that is kind of a really bad day, you know. So I think that is really bad...

Ann’s version of data collection was determined by the intervention as she said:

The thing with the Supplemental is it has to be something you can, well, more in the Intensive too, that you have to be able to test it. Sometimes that is a drawback because there are different skills you would like the child to work on, but you have to get something you can get data on. Or that is—looking for the word—that has a grade equivalent that we can compare them to.
Rather than choosing good interventions and then looking for ways to measure their success, the teachers were using data collection procedures to determine the interventions.

The most meaningful purpose for the Child Study Team meeting, from all that I heard and observed, was to get help for the teacher with their most problematic students. The outcomes of the Child Study Team meetings were either a Supplemental plan or an Intensive plan, which someone other than Lynn or Ann would usually implement. For example, the team decided an associate would be executing the Intensive plan for Colin with Lynn making flash cards or games for the associate to use. The use of the referral process in this manner was not surprising. When the educational system is urged to try harder, to invest more effort in students who are difficult to teach and manage, the pushback from educators will be an unconscious attempt to make it work to their benefit.

From a micropolitical perspective, one might say that attempt would be a conscious one, teachers drawing from their own experiences with students in the classroom (Hargreaves, 1984). If that experience entailed outsiders meeting students’ needs, it would justify the teacher’s belief that the student should not be served solely by them. Because a student’s problem was outside their experience of normalcy, the teachers perceived a need for additional support.

**Teachers Drove the Process**

For both Lynn and Ann, the whole referral process began with them. The teachers initiated the process by submitting students’ names to the CAT teams or the Child Study Teams. They drove the process in yet another way: Every example I studied
resulted in the team taking action suggested by the teacher. At the Child Study Team meeting on Colin, Lynn’s student with reading and behavior difficulties, Lynn set the tone and direction of the meeting by giving a long narrative of Colin’s problems and their potential causes. She began:

Yes, he is primarily struggling in reading—and lots of things go into play, and we are not really sure. He has some behavior and motivation type of problems, you know, and he is really frustrated. And I think that as far as effort goes...he’s kind of at the point where you can’t keep telling him to try and try harder because he can’t do it and he knows that...So my biggest concern is he’s just not making a lot of progress in reading. He was in Reading Recovery and was dismissed from that. He does show some growth in his sounds and letters—well, he just, I think gets a little overwhelmed with the task of reading, even though he can read and word by word tried to figure it out. It’s just labor intensive for him and not easy as you would like it to be. And I think—just knowing sight words—he just doesn’t know a lot of words. It is hard to read.

Through her narrative, Lynn determined Colin’s main problem, reading, for the team and suggested a solution: increase his sight word recognition. While the other team members added additional supportive information, no one suggested a different problem or solution. When the team considered Colin might have attention problems, Lynn was quick to disagree and pushed the team to focus on his academics by saying, “okay, so what do we do about the academics?”

Lynn brought data she felt pertinent, not data which were required, but data she felt were important. She reported Colin’s scores from his weekly reading tests and Word Wall words assessments. The Title 1 reading teacher contributed her data which included Colin’s accuracy score and self-correction score on a Reading Recovery level twelve book he read to her.
The team decided to put Colin on an Intensive plan, which meant a paraprofessional would be able to help him with his sight words. Six weeks later, when the team met again, the Intensive plan was “tweaked” by adding the taking of “old tests” with the continuation of his work with sight words. The implementation of the Intensive plan continued to be the responsibility of the paraprofessional. Through the special education referral process, Lynn was able to secure a paraprofessional on a daily basis to help Colin. This relieved her of finding the time to give him extra support and, from Lynn’s point of view, gave Colin what she thought he needed.

In Emma’s case, the results were similar. Lynn’s student was discussed by the Child Study Team in March. By that time, Lynn’s patience with her had run out. She had been frustrated with Emma’s behavior since Thanksgiving. Although the team meeting started with a discussion of what to do with all the discipline referrals Emma had accumulated over the year, when the discussion moved to dealing with Emma’s behaviors, Lynn was in the driver’s seat. Lynn offered an explanation as to the triggers for Emma’s behaviors:

Well, she started off the year really blending in well with her peers and didn’t seem to stick out at all and as the year has progressed, primarily—I would say Thanksgiving time, like as the holidays got closer she just couldn’t handle any kind of disappointments or not getting her way very well . . . A big trigger is, if she doesn’t pass a test in Rocket Math or doesn’t get 100 on her spelling test and doesn’t get her Snickers, that is a weekly, almost a guarantee that—and when she gets upset she pouts, she cries, and then she starts yelling at other kids to stop looking at her and then she basically kinda shuts down and she has a really hard time getting out of that.

And she continued:

And she becomes really disruptive and it’s nearly impossible to continue to have class while she’s still in the room, but also then eventually she comes down off of
that and then she’s fine. When she kind of gets in these moods and having a temper tantrum she’s really like a different child. I mean, like I said, she gives you nasty facial expressions and she’s yelling at other kids and she shuts down and refuses to do anything, but then when she’s not like that, she’s eager to please and in a really good mood and “I’m going to try really hard” and I’m trying to think of—she does set up like, particular peers, I mean there is another child or two in particular that really know exactly which buttons to push and they push them and she does the exact same thing to them. I mean it’s not all one-sided.

Lynn reported to the team the “primitive data” which consisted of a chart reflecting Emma’s behaviors that caused her to be sent to the office. No specific data from an intervention were presented. Anecdotal data from Lynn were the main source of information about Emma. Lynn shared examples like this:

Particularly if she gets in trouble... if she is sitting next to a particular child or two, like, and she had to lose a chip then there’s a problem. Like yesterday, a specific example just to describe, she got into trouble because she was taunting another child because he had gotten into trouble but she was teasing him about it. Real sneaky, you know, I didn’t hear it but I knew something was going on, you know, and then she got in trouble and had to lose a chip because of it and then when I was talking to her she was plugging her ears, ‘I’m not listening to you’ and then she just—it escalates very fast. Like a switch.

Eventually the team moved toward considering Emma’s academic progress and Lynn thought Emma was behind, which the counselor confirmed with a report of Emma’s Iowa Test of Basic Skill scores. After Emma’s low scores were reported, Lynn jumped in and suggested Emma would do better if she got some individual support:

I feel like she is with it or has enough going on that she should be at reading level and know things. In addition to classroom [instruction], she just needs five or ten minutes of help a day, you know what I mean? One-on-one which would really make sure she’s getting it.”

The principal didn’t disagree with that and explained her rationale for one-on-one support:
To me it would seem like even if we had somebody to go through her sight words and went through her spelling words for ten minutes a day, it sounds like it's an academic one [Intensive Plan] but maybe by doing that we wouldn't have the behavior because she would be getting attention. And plus she might get her Snickers, plus she would earn her Snickers, it wouldn't be given to her, she would actually earn it, but she would also get the attention and those types of things too. Now saying that, I also think we have to think about what supports we will give her for behavior. So maybe it is a dual Intensive type of thing.

The outcome of this initial Child Study Team meeting was an Intensive plan for Emma based on Lynn’s description of Emma’s behavior and her suggestion for one-on-one support. I suspect the principal also knew Lynn had become extremely frustrated with Emma’s behavior and she felt this plan might relieve some of that frustration.

Ann had already initiated a Child Study Team meeting for Seth before my study began. The first meeting I attended, Ann reported to the team that she and the speech and language pathologist had come up with a plan on how to help Seth with his writing. She described the discussion with her colleague like this:

Since writing [written expression] is a big problem, we sat down and decided what we can do to help him in that area and came up with a couple things that I would like to try and I’m not sure if we want to write this into a Supplemental or how exactly that is all going to go.

Ann was fully in charge of the meeting. She continued telling the team what the plan for Seth was going to be, the use of wordless books as a catalyst for writing. Ann also had a plan for what the parents could do at home to support Seth’s writing. She told the team she had story starters which she would send home. From Ann’s perspective, the parents could sit down with Seth and he would finish the sentence of the story starter and write another sentence. When the other team members suggested alternatives to the plan fearing Seth’s loss of creativity through the wordless books, Ann responded by saying
"We try to give him an idea to start with because he can’t get the ideas,” and dismissed the suggestion.

After the plan for Seth’s written expression was presented, the team questioned his vocabulary skills. Ann reported his standardized test scores: His total reading score indicated he was reading at the second grade, sixth month level but his vocabulary score was at the kindergarten level. Ann had an explanation for the difference in scores, yet she also expressed puzzlement to the team:

It’s just what words you have heard in life, like a window sill. It’s like a ledge and it’s just, if you come across those words you’ll do fine. I have kids that are reading at third grade level that get kindergarten scores for vocabulary. And then I get a student like Miranda, who we’ll bring up next, who scored huge on vocabulary but her reading scores are real low. I just don’t get it.

Four weeks later, the team met again to discuss Seth’s progress. The speech pathologist and Ann shared the progress he was making with his writing. It was evident he was increasing his output in writing, but Ann was still concerned with the narrowness of the plan. When the idea of story organizers as a stepping stone toward more independence was suggested by the school psychologist, Ann didn’t disagree, but she expressed concern with the amount of time that would take for herself or another teacher. She was adamant that a teacher would need to commit at least a twenty minute block to help Seth with a story organizer, time which was difficult for any teacher to find. An associate would be able to give that kind of time, but probably a teacher would not. The idea was dropped and the team “continued on” for the remainder of the year.

Another one of Ann’s students, Miranda, was on the Child Study Team agenda as well. Ann led the team in reporting Miranda’s place in the referral process. She was on a
Supplemental plan for mathematics that was implemented by Ann’s teaching partner. The plan was succeeding for Miranda according to Ann. In the area of reading, Ann had conversed with the Title 1 Reading teacher prior to the meeting and found Miranda had many strengths she could build upon and her weak areas were mainly reversals and sight words recognition.

Ann shared the data from the *Iowa Test of Basic Skills* for Miranda which indicated she was in the average to above average range for a first grader. The team credited Miranda’s mom for helping her at home with her math and reading. Ann expressed the idea that if this progress continued, Miranda wouldn’t need any extra support at school. Ann also told the team she was supporting Miranda’s mother by telling her things she should and should not do with Miranda in the area of reading. In the counselors’ words that was a good idea because “it wouldn’t take so much of your [Ann’s] time.” Ann agreed to place Miranda on a Supplemental plan for Word Wall word recognition and stated, “I can commit to three days a week because I can easily do that with my schedule right now.” So Ann admitted she could find the time, with Mother’s support, to help Miranda herself.

By being in charge of the referral process, teachers solely decided which child was to be discussed. Generally, these students were the ones who absorbed more teacher time than other students. Gerber (1988) referred to this phenomenon as outside the teachers’ “tolerance.” Gerber (1988) used tolerance to indicate that teachers formed a permissible boundary, resembling a confidence interval, on some aspect of student performance. If a student is considered outside the “norm” of academic performance or
if the behavior of the student is outside the behavioral norm of the class, the student rises to the level of the teacher’s attention so that the teacher is the lone decider as to whether or not she enters the student in the referral process.

This type of decision-making is not unexpected given the organization of the school. Schools, like Flicker Elementary, have organized themselves as professional bureaucracies (Skrtic, 1991), because the work teachers do with and for students is too complex to be reduced to a task-analysis of skills as found in machine bureaucracies. The division of labor in a professional bureaucracy is achieved through specialization; in schools, this appears as grade level teachers, art, music, physical education, computer, media, special education and reading teachers. In this type of organization, students are distributed among specialized teachers because they are thought to have the skills required by the children. The complex work of all these teachers is coordinated by standardizing the skills of teachers. This is accomplished through the intensive education and socialization delivered in preservice education programs for teachers (Skrtic, 1991).

In principle, teachers should know the theory behind their work and have the discretion to adapt it to the actual needs of their students. “In practice, however, the standardization of skills is circumscribed; it provides professionals with a finite repertoire of standard programs that are applicable to only a finite number of contingencies or presumed client needs (Skrtic, 2004, p. 110). For example, Lynn was frustrated with the Reading Recovery program in her school and she wished the Orton Gillingham approach was available to her students. The reading teachers were only trained with the Reading Recovery program and if the program didn’t meet the student’s
needs, as it didn’t for Colin, he was dismissed to Lynn’s classroom still struggling with reading. If the Orton Gillingham approach or any other approach might have met the needs of students more effectively than the Reading Recovery program, it wasn’t available to them. The students who were unable to conform and learn by conventional programs and methods were the ones placed in the special education referral process because they were out of the teacher’s tolerance area.

Teachers are expected to carefully implement the programs they have been provided and trained to use; they do not invent new ones for new contingencies. That is why it is so difficult to address students’ reading needs. The same solution was given to both Colin and Emma, but for different problems. Working with Word Wall words was a standard response to a reading problem. There were no new interventions for the unique and complex problems Colin and Emma displayed at school. Instead of being able to accommodate heterogeneity, teachers screen it out. This can be done by squeezing their students’ needs into one of their standard programs or by squeezing them out of the teacher-child relationship altogether (Skrtic, 2004) by placing them on an Intensive plan and sending them down the hall to work with a paraprofessional or special education teacher.

Producers and Reproducers of the Functionalist View of Schooling

There are many ways to make sense of the world in which we live. Our worldview is a shared pattern of basic beliefs and assumptions about the nature of how the world works (Skrtic, 1995). One of the prevailing worldviews, or paradigms, in the social sciences of the twentieth century is functionalism (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999;
This framework argues that society is composed of different structures, each with a specific function vital to the survival of the society. If any one of those functions fails, the entire society suffers. To assure this doesn’t happen, other structures in the society take over if one structure fails.

It is therefore important to understand the beliefs and assumptions of the functionalist view of schooling because these assumptions tell us the nature of the most widely shared consensus about the function of schooling. “The functional paradigm offers both an explanation and a justification for the role of schools in our society” (Hurn, 1993, p.42). I will provide examples of how the functional paradigm is so ingrained in school personnel’s belief systems that they are unaware of its influence upon them. The functional paradigm has become the norm for school personnel because for the majority of their lives they have so accepted their worldview that it conceals the very reasons for their actions. Specifically, their unquestioned assumptions, grounded in this paradigm, are critical to understand because they inform school personnel’s practices, policies, and decisions about students.

There are two presuppositions which one accepts when explaining the purpose of schools from a functionalist perspective. One presupposition is that schools function as a way to transmit the attitudes, values, skills and norms from one generation to another (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999; Hurn, 1993). Schools perpetuate the accepted social norms. These longstanding norms center on the necessity for students to be obedient, compliant, respectful of authority, and value the education chosen for them by people in authority. When students fail to meet these social and academic norms, the school
system adjusts by singling out the students for examination or scrutiny. In my study, Emma, Colin, Seth, and Miranda were students who were brought by their teachers to a team of professionals to be discussed because of their failure to conform to standards set by the school and, by extension, society. Evidence of the transmission of these attitudes, values, skills and norms could be found simply by stepping into the classrooms of Lynn and Ann. For example, in Lynn’s classroom, on a large poster hanging in the front of the classroom, were the class rules. Each rule was written in large red letters easily visible from the back of the room. These were the five class rules.

1. Follow the Golden Rule.
2. Let the teacher teach.
3. Follow directions right away.
4. Listen when others talk.
5. Keep hands, feet, and objects to yourself.

All five of these not only instruct classroom behavior, but they also reflect the larger purpose of instilling civility in the form of orderly compliance and recognition of the teacher’s activities as the organizing focal point of the classroom. Further, the overt reference to the Golden Rule connects the classroom to different religions, most certainly the Judeo-Christian tradition, sometimes seen as the source of norms and values for this society.

Civility itself can be seen as a central component of the West’s greatest tensions—the interrelationship between the community and the individual, between obligation and freedom. The community of students is obligated to respect the teacher by letting her teach, to follow directions right away, to allow others to talk, and to not
physically interfere with others. At the same time, the individual teacher is free to practice her craft, and each student has the freedom to participate appropriately, without verbal or physical interference from others.

The second rule transmits the norms which student are to learn—people in authority, particularly the teacher, are in charge and they know what the students need from them. The third rule supports the perspective that efficiency is expected in schools and that there is no time to waste. By following the directions the first time, more can get accomplished from the teachers’ perspective and the principal will be more impressed with the teacher’s performance. It is worth noting that while the third rule begins with the importance of respecting authority by following directions, it ends by introducing a peculiar American value—efficiency. Not only are students exhorted to obey, but two words (“right away”) are used to make it clear that time is too precious to waste.

Children come to school with different histories, cultural backgrounds, habits, and dispositions. Some students follow directions from day one, while others do not. In fact, classroom time is allotted to teach the skills of listening, following directions and even patience. This is entirely consistent with the functionalist belief that schools exist to support the family in these tasks and vice-versa. In extremity, of course, the school must teach these skills unaided by the home life of some students.

A specific example of the school functioning as the transmitter of social norms was expressed in Lynn’s struggle with her student Emily. At the time of my observations, Emily was struggling with obedience and compliance to Lynn’s direction. Lynn described Emma as “throwing fits,” “yelling,” and “pouting.” As I explored this
issue with Lynn, she agreed that Emma did not always behave in this manner. “I would say in the beginning of the school year, she didn’t stick out at all,” reported Lynn. In Lynn’s mind there were behaviors that were socially acceptable and others which were not. Once Emma’s behaviors violated the rules and norms, she was singled out as a “problem” student who needed “extra support.” Schools and society will not tolerate individuals whose behavior is deviant from the norm.

Without actually articulating it, Lynn knew it was her job to socialize the students by transmitting acceptable societal attitudes, values, skills and norms as part of her teaching day. It was an understanding she had because she was a product of a functional system and is now a teacher in such a system. When I asked her for her most desired change regardless of its practicality, her only desire was for a second adult in the classroom. This makes it clear that Lynn saw the established mission and contemporary practices of the school as entirely satisfactory. Her only desire was to accomplish the mission and implement the practices more efficiently.

The second presupposition of the functionalist perspective is the recognition that the practices of the educational profession are grounded in particular bodies of knowledge derived from the scientific method (Skrtic, 1995). The scientific method is thought to be the only way to achieve objectivity necessary to see the world as it really is (Kaestle, 1993; Langemann, 2000). Educators are viewed by society as professionals who have achieved a certain level of formal knowledge, premised on positivist epistemology, which they are expected to apply to their students in a way that benefits them. Educator’s formal knowledge, gained through a curriculum of formal study in a professional school,
are general principles, theories, or propositions which they could then apply to their students (Schein, 1972).

The teachers in my study have been required to take courses from modern universities which derive their knowledge from positivism. It is not possible for anyone to gain a position in an educational institution without going through a curriculum of formal study. This in itself reinforces the functionalist paradigm. The body of knowledge which grounded Lynn's thinking as an undergraduate and graduate were shaped by psychology and scientific management. Examples of her courses were "Psychological Foundations of Education," "Learning Theory: Advanced Educational Psychology," "Reading Fundamentals," and Assessment Procedures and Diagnosis of Reading Disability." Similarly, the principal, a central figure in the school, has been schooled in a formal curriculum of study which was grounded in scientific management. The special education teacher has studied a field grounded in psychology and biology.

Such professionals draw their knowledge from the social disciplines. Because the social sciences are modeled on the objectivist view (Skrtic, 1995), the positivist epistemology derived from the social disciplines is presented to aspiring teachers and administrators as the "truth" or the "right way" to approach educating students. The nature and effects of the teachers' and administrators' applied and practical knowledge depends upon whence they draw their theoretical knowledge. A functionalist framework assumes that the social world is composed of relatively concrete empirical artifacts and relationships which can be identified, studied and measured through approaches derived from the natural sciences (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), thus it is not surprising the teachers
and administrators view their world from this perspective. School personnel in this study were unconsciously reproducing this paradigm because they are products, through their professional training, of this worldview.

Because these individuals in their respective roles as special and general education teachers as well as the principal, all come together to discuss the students who fall outside expected norms, they bring to the table mutually reinforcing assumptions which guide and justify the practices of all three fields: general education, special education, and educational administration, and ultimately the institution of the school (Skrtic, 1995). Preservice training is important to understand because it contributes to the behaviors and thinking of school personnel.

Lynn has her Master degree in Reading which she earned two years ago. She remembers a course called *Exceptional Learner*, and that, in her words, “fulfilled the special education requirement.” She also stated, “I do remember learning about the basic laws and the least restrictive environment and those kinds of terms. Now having taught and now looking back on it, I don’t really feel like it gave me much practical knowledge.” She vaguely remembered taking an educational psychology course, although her classroom management style was largely punitive. The clearest evidence of this was her “Behavior Board.” This was a pegboard with each student’s name on it. Beside the student name was a hook. On each student’s hook were metal tags with colored paper glued to each one. There was a colored poster key at the top of the pegboard. The colors represented the following consequences.

- Green—great job!
- Yellow—warning
Blue—lose 5 minutes of recess  
Small orange—lose 10 minutes of recess  
White—lose all recesses  
Red—phone or note home, go to office.

When I asked Lynn about the operational part of the Behavior Board she explained it to me as part of her classroom management system. Lynn did not design this system based on a deep analysis of her own philosophy. It was a system that was replicated from her observations in a school where she had previously taught. She liked it and felt she needed something to use to manage the students’ behavior. It was a system she believed forced her to be more consistent with her consequences with students. As Lynn revealed, “I had a hard time being consistent and firm making a kid move from yellow to red just for talking and so this kind of makes it a lot better about being firm.” It was also a system which reinforced the functional paradigm.

Returning to the analysis of Lynn’s coursework in education, she does remember learning about diagnostic tools, “like the BRI [Beginning Reading Inventory] and learning about early literacy assessments ….that diagnosed weaknesses and where to work on them from there.” Lynn admitted she didn’t learn about diagnosing the causes of reading difficulties, rather she learned about the tools for identifying reading deficits. Preservice students do go through the motions, so to speak, of examining their teaching practices, but those practices are not really in question in any serious sense. Or, some practices may be seen as better than others for students experiencing difficulty. Yet, when all the rather circumscribed approaches are exhausted, the inevitable conclusion is student deficiency, not further attempts to expand practices beyond the narrow boundaries of accepted procedures. Lynn’s pedagogy was being informed through her
preservice coursework. Her approach to teaching has been grounded partly in the theoretical knowledge she gained through her university classes.

Being taught through courses which have a grounding in psychology, Lynn’s unquestioned assumptions are reinforced through the employment of a school psychologist. She is now employed in a typical, small town school system, where problems with students are brought to a team of people, one of whom is a certified school psychologist. During a team meeting on a specific student, the school psychologist was designated to monitor that student’s progress. She would pull the student from class once a week and assess his reading progress through using the sanctioned probes. These probes were part of the psychologist’s “core” materials that were given to her by her employer, the local area education agency. The reading passages from the probes were then compared to the area education agency’s local norms, of which the psychologist had the only copy. There is a subliminal message being sent in this system. A school psychologist is a necessary authority to monitor the student’s progress and determine whether or not the student had a large enough discrepancy from his peers to warrant consideration of special services. Because Lynn has received instruction grounded in psychology, she and others accept this as a necessary and helpful part of the system. By approaching the student’s problems with this psychological foundation, the deficits will always lie within the child waiting to be “diagnosed” and treated.

When school personnel sat down at the table to discuss a student deficit, the principal was usually present. As mentioned earlier, the principal has had training grounded in the field of scientific management, which implicitly treats efficiency and
effectiveness as priorities in decision making. This seemed to ring true in Lynn's school. As an example, collaboration time had been scheduled by the principal as a means of achieving more effective teaching as efficiently as possible. Lynn reported that "our collaboration effort is required to be thirty minutes" and that "we just have to kind of document short notes [from the collaboration meetings] I suppose, as proof that we have done it." She also indicated that teachers were generally given the collaborative topic. Andrew Hargreaves (1991) found in his study when collaboration is observed through a micropolitical lens, the collegiality was often an unwanted managerial imposition from the point of view of teachers subjected to it, or more usually, a way of co-opting teachers to fulfill administrative purposes and the implementation of external mandates.

This applied to the situation in Lynn's school. The school district was scheduled for a site visit from the State Department of Education. The principal was required, by law, to have her special education program reviewed and updated by a committee of teachers. Using the collaboration time, the principal required the teachers to review a document describing their Special Education Delivery System, which the teachers received via email. They didn't understand the document or the purpose of their review, yet they followed through as expected. As Lynn described it:

At the last collaboration... we didn't really know what we were supposed to do... when the special education guide came in... we were not real clear on what we were supposed to do with it, ... read through it together and we just kind of—we really didn't feel like it was like something—like what could we talk about, we felt like it was knowledge things we didn't think we would agree or disagree.

This is precisely the kind of contrived collaboration Hargreaves (1991) found teachers describing in his study. The principal had to find an efficient and effective way
to meet the requirement mandated by the state. She used the scheduled collaboration
time with teachers as a means to do this. The teachers, on the other hand, did not
understand what they were to do, yet they complied and gave the principal enough
feedback so that she could meet the mandate and move on to other demands.

Other distinguishing characteristics of the functionalist worldview, in general,
.presuppose that social reality is objective, inherently orderly, and rational. To be
objective, which is what most professionals think they should value when determining a
course of action, usually means seeing things the way they are (Eisner, 1998). They
attempt to prevent emotions clouding their judgment of an observable situation.
Objectivity is valued in scientific research. The bodies of knowledge that teachers and
administrators have studied have generally adopted the methods of the natural sciences
and therefore assume social reality can be represented objectively, thus predicting and
controlling the way humans react to it (Skrtic, 1995).

This was evident in Ann’s and Lynn’s undergraduate training. For example Lynn
remembered in one of her classes a discussion of students with learning problems, “I do
know they talked about different learning disabilities and just kind of that there was a
discrepancy between what they could be achieving and what they are, but I don’t really
remember any concrete things to try—you know what I mean?” This statement
underscores Lynn’s acceptance of the supposedly objective nature of determining
whether or not a student had a learning disability by looking at the discrepancy between
the IQ score and classroom performance. Her comment about not getting anything
concrete to try with students who have a learning disability indicates that her desire to
learn what to do with them dominates and perhaps even makes irrelevant her desire to understand the nature of the disability. When I conversed with Lynn formally and informally, it was clear to me that she cared a great deal about her students and wanted them not only to learn what she thought they needed to learn, but also to enjoy the school experience. Her conceptual assumptions about learning, which come from a functionalist perspective even though Lynn was not familiar with that term, informed her beliefs and practice. As I probed further to understand her beliefs about learning disabilities she told me, “I think back to the old definition of LD where they were probably, you know, had enough intelligence that their performance didn’t match that level.” Believing that students “had enough intelligence” told me this teacher internalized the hegemonic assumption that students came to her pre-equipped with various set degrees of intelligence, leading to the conclusion that if they didn’t perform, they were either under-endowed or experienced some other impairment that interfered with their capacity to mobilize their predetermined intellectual abilities.

Functionalists believe social reality is objective, allowing the idea of right and wrong views. This was carried into the classroom through Lynn’s belief in the “objectivity” of her weekly reading tests. Each test, found at the end of a unit, involved students reading a short passage and picking one of the multiple choice answers. This type of procedural objectivity (Eisner, 1998) was designed—or aspired—to eliminate the scope for personal judgment. Once the test had been constructed, scoring did not require apparent judgment, so the test was seen as objective. The teacher reported these scores to the team when she introduced the student for discussion. However, when a first grader
reads a passage and is forced to choose just one of the given answers, it is possible his interpretation of a word or phrase could make a difference in his final choice. The student’s incorrect response may make perfect sense within the context of his or her personal and cultural experiences. Thus, when Lynn marks a response as incorrect because it doesn’t match the answer key, she may be missing much that might give evidence of student competence. Instead, because the test is objective with right and wrong answers clearly stated, the teacher quickly marks his paper with a score and adds that data to her evidence. As she described it, “You have to read a sentence and fill in the blank, and it’s always those high frequency words, and the words that the sentences are composed of are... post high frequency... phonic skills [sic] we have covered.” Clearly, from what I interpreted from Lynn’s comments, the students should have been able to get the tests correct because it was the material she taught in class.

Beyond Lynn’s assumptions about objectivity, from understanding disability to testing, her school had also created processes which were based on the assumption that social reality is objective. One example was the process they use for dealing with struggling learners. A teacher would bring to the rest of the team “objective” data, such as the reading test scores I described earlier, tally sheets for compliance to specific behaviors the child needs to meet, writing samples of the child’s work, etc. and shared with the team her explanations of what the child was doing, based on the “evidence.” Then the team “brainstormed” additional ways in which the teacher helped the child. In Lynn’s words:

We start what we call a Supplemental Plan which is something extra in addition to classroom instruction which needs to be done daily and faithfully to try and get
the child back to where they need to be... Before we start them we do get a baseline of data. The whole... system is being data driven... figuring out what they know and then administering a supplemental... and then plotting data points.

The need for “baseline” data reflected the belief that scientific research valuably informs teacher practices.

It is understandable that school officials have adopted the scientific research model for education because it has received verification and support from many sources throughout the nation. The National Research Council has attempted to validate scientific research in education through their 2002 report, *Scientific Research In Education*, but their argument that there is a unified science across the natural, social and educational sciences has left scholars, if not school personnel, deconstructing this argument (Gaile & Cannella, 2004; Gallagher, 2004; Popkewitz, 2004). According to Section 7891(37) of the No Child Left Behind Act, the term "scientifically-based research" is defined as “research that involves the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs” (No Child Left Behind, 2001). School personnel will accept without question the objectivity of scientific research because they do not have the time nor the training to critique it. But as more and more emphasis and value is placed on scientific methodology by requiring teachers to do data collection and analysis, I anticipate that there will be some questioning and push back. This sense of mild or tacit skepticism was expressed by Lynn when she offered the following comment:

I do think that maybe education is trying to let the science part catch up a little bit with the numbers and the data, you know, where I think the hard thing about
education is it is a mix of art and science. So I think that you do use your observations, you do use your gut and those things are not very objective.

Lynn and Ann recognized there was more to a child and more to teaching than numbers and ostensibly objective data. Both were working in a place and time that valued the scientific research studies as the only studies which could effectively improve student achievement.

The social reality found in schools assumes teachers view students objectively and produce statements of fact when discussing individual student concerns. In my study, I did not hear teachers openly express frustration with students or disparage students in any way. This behavior would not be considered professional. The functional paradigm has reinforced the teachers’ perceived need for objectivity, distance, and emotional detachment.

However, when I spoke to the teachers individually about their students after a team meeting, I heard in their voices and saw in their nonverbal gestures an emotional response. They were unable to separate their emotions from the “facts” about the child. The “facts” were the observations they made of the student’s behavior, but the interpretation of these “facts” was not open for deliberate analysis. This is because the teachers’ training was based on positivism in which interpretation and judgment have no validity. One might venture that the positivist epistemology sustaining their teacher preparation programs frames teacher judgment as invalid and thus unprofessional.

The lack of different interpretations of an observed behavior is one of the premises of the objectivity that sustains the functionalist perspective. Here is an example from my study. Ann, a first grade teacher, described one of her student’s writing
difficulties and offered to the team, "What our problem is, is we just try to give him an idea to start with because he can’t get the ideas.” The student, Seth, was having difficulty writing a story. He would simply sit quietly at his desk. He was not bothering anyone, yet neither did he write when he was supposed to be writing. Ann observed him not writing and concluded he couldn’t think of anything to write about. When the team was presented Ann’s interpretation as fact, the team members readily agreed that giving him the ideas to write about was the solution to Seth’s writing problem. There was no discussion of different interpretations of why Seth would not write when he was supposed to be writing. Perhaps he had too many ideas in his head and couldn’t pick just one, perhaps he felt he wasn’t a good enough speller and was afraid to put his ideas down on paper, perhaps he saw no purpose in the assignment. Whatever Seth’s reason for not writing, it was assumed he couldn’t think of any ideas. Subsequently, the team did not consider alternative reasons for his refusal to engage in writing activities. This apparent lack of consideration for other interpretations reflects the views commonly associated with a functionalist perspective.
CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY

Questions Revisited

As a result of this qualitative study which explored the special education referral process through an in-depth look at two first grade teachers in a small rural school, I learned much, including some answers to my four basic research questions which guided my study. Below I will revisit those questions and the conclusions I reached after listening to and observing the teachers over a period of time.

My first question asked how and why are certain students chosen for the referral process. I learned Instructional Decision Making, which was modeled after the Response to Intervention movement, was the special education referral process for this school. The teachers referred students who were the most troublesome for them and who seemed to take up more of the teachers' time than they felt they had to give. I also concluded the referral process began with the teachers and was predicated on the belief that a child had a deficiency of one kind or another, which was not surprising given the historical attempts to identify students with disabilities. The medical model, popular during the 1940s and 1950s, still holds power in the public schools. The construct Lynn and Ann held with the banking concept of education (Freire, 1970), supported the possibility of a malfunction of the brain or neurological system if a student didn't comprehend or remember information.

My second question asked how decisions were made about the student once the process began. The decisions were based on the needs the teacher presented to the team
and her desired outcome for that student. There were vocabulary and procedural changes with the implementation of Instructional Decision Making, but the intent of the model was largely misunderstood. The universal screening, high quality instruction in research-based interventions, and the robust data collection on that intervention seemed to elude the teams. The teachers were not collecting and analyzing data, nor choosing interventions in a meaningful way. They implemented weak interventions and instruction was many times delivered by a paraprofessional rather than a teacher. Because teachers were the main drivers of the process, the results of referring students to the Child Study Team included additional support from another adult prior to an eligibility decision. This relieved the teachers of the extra time needed to work with a child on an individual basis to improve his or her deficit area.

The third question that guided my study asked what decisions were made about the students. In addition, what reasons/rationales were provided to support these decisions? None of the four students I followed, who were referred into the process, were placed in special education during their first grade year. I learned in this study that teachers used a limited number of teaching strategies and interventions to address complex student problems. Lynn and her team both decided to use word wall drills to increase the success rate of reading for Colin and Emma, who were individual students with different problems. The strategies were not research-based, although the teachers believed they would work for the student. Even when the data were gathered and the child was showing minimal progress with the strategy or intervention, it was continued. Because the same solutions kept recurring, it appeared the teachers did not have a large
repertoire of interventions for addressing a student problem. A second element of the
decision process suggests itself. Complex problems were usually met with a response of
rote drill. One has to wonder if, in addition to their scant repertoire, teachers were also
influenced by their lack of resources. Rote memorization drills can easily be
implemented by an untrained associate, which a more complex intervention might not
allow. Lacking adequate time themselves, teachers might be subconsciously inclined to
choose interventions that can be implemented by others.

Measuring and ranking first grade students were common practices in this school
that were done at various times and in various ways. Even the Stepping Stone program,
which was advertised as an “alternative approach” to first grade and a move away from
the lock-step curriculum and grade level promotion, measured and ranked their students
to move them within that program. In fact, that program most likely did so more
frequently than the traditional program because of their need to move students around to
different groups. So, what claimed to be an alternative program for students was just
more of the same in a different way. The special education referral process also required
measuring students, through progress monitoring, before decisions could be made about
continuing or discontinuing an intervention. The measurement for the referral process
was focused on the number of data points needed before a change could be made. Which
data were to be collected was difficult for the team to decide, and its choices of data were
poor.

The fourth question which guided this study asked what were the attitudes and
beliefs of school personnel that influence the process. Through this study, I learned these
educators hold a functionalist view of schooling. They are products of such a worldview, and they are reproducing that view in their everyday practices. The result of the teachers adhering to the functionalist paradigm was simply more of the same rather than a meaningful change of any magnitude.

**Implications**

There are three major implications that I gleaned from this study. The first implication was that the special education referral process was initiated by teachers for the purpose of getting adult support. This released them from working with their difficult students on an individual basis for period of fifteen to thirty minutes each day. The referral process was intended to identify the “right” students for special education, but rather, it was a process available to teachers to make their work load a little lighter. The students who cost the teacher the most time and energy were the ones referred. It wasn’t so much that the student needed special education, but rather that the teacher needed someone to work with the child on a one-on-one basis. The answer was always more adult support, never a change in instructional strategy, materials, or assessments. With the Instructional Decision Making model, that one-on-one assistance came through the Intensive plans, a structure within the referral system. There was no longer a need to go all the way to eligibility for special education to get that support. The teachers could get support earlier just by getting the child into the referral process. Because the Intensive plans were usually implemented by a paraprofessional or another teacher, the referring teacher got the help she desired.
The definition of micropolitics is the use of power to achieve preferred outcome in organizational settings (Blase, 2000). The availability of the special education process to any teacher enabled her to use her position and drive the process to achieve the outcome she desired. This was what Lynn and Ann did in my study. I do not believe it was a conscious decision on their parts, but as teachers, they used the process to get the help they needed.

To reduce the need for teachers to use the special education process as a means to support their work, this study would suggest teachers needed to be released from some of the responsibilities required of them. Lynn and Ann were very committed teachers, but were overwhelmed at times with their work. They spent time outside the school day preparing for the next. Lynn told me she would come back to school at night to finish up work after her young daughter went to bed. They both were kept busy isolating skills, documenting, assessing, comparing progress of students, attending various meetings, and learning new curriculum which left little time in the day to engage in thoughtful, reflective planning for their students. Examining and restructuring the resources in the school, together with a creative imagination, might make it possible for teachers to find either the instructional methods or the support they need for their students without going through the referral process.

The second implication I gleaned is that moving to an RTI-based model did not, in fact, change the referral process substantively in this school. Yes, the words have changed, the procedures attempted to be a bit more rigorous, but in practice, the teachers continued to refer those individual students from their classrooms who were giving them
the most trouble. These students were outside of what Gerber (2005) called the teacher's tolerance area. Elements of the previous referral process were evident. Teams of professionals were still meeting to discuss “problem” students one at a time. Rationales as to why the student had a problem were still focused on the individual student. Data were still being collected. The changes in the new process included the addition of layers of data collection, through Supplemental and Intensive plans, and the timelines required for those data to be collected, neither of which amount to a substantive change in practice or thinking.

This continuation of familiar practice for special education referrals is based on a functional worldview that is held by many educators. The functional paradigm has become the norm for school personnel concealing the very reasons for their actions. From a functionalist perspective, schools perpetuate the accepted social and academic norms. When students fail to meet these norms, the students are singled out by the teacher and held under scrutiny. It is these students who are placed by their teacher into the referral process. We have changed the vocabulary, we have added layer upon layer of data collection and analysis, but in the end, for the teachers, their view of the process remains the same.

If beliefs and assumptions about the referral process go unchallenged, teachers will continue to teach and make decisions based on those beliefs. It is not enough to expose teachers to new procedures; for there to be substantive change, more than just exposure is needed. A real change in beliefs and assumptions requires teachers to engage in conversations with others who question and challenge the thinking behind the way
things are done. This is not an easy task. The years of indoctrination in norms and attitudes toward differences in students are not easily overcome. They are not conversations that are easy to hold in staff meetings after school. Conversations of this type are uncomfortable because they have the potential to challenge a teacher’s self-image.

Yet, identification procedures have moved through the years, albeit in superficial ways. Today’s process attempts to create an “evidenced-based” disability for students, but the teachers are still referring students from their classroom who do not fit the expected norm. Until teachers, administrators, and policy makers engage in critical thinking about disability and learning, the “right” student for special education will be the student who is most problematic in the classroom. For there to be any substantive change in our approach to special education identification, teachers and administrators must be given the time and opportunity to deeply examine their beliefs and assumptions about learning, behavior and disability and then be given the freedom to act upon the resulting well-articulated beliefs.

The third implication is that teachers understand differences as negative and need to be “fixed” by someone other than themselves. The teachers also viewed disability as a deficit. The idea of being different or “not normal” is a view which has been constructed by society and culture. It is a human construct, to consider someone who is different as “not normal.” Rather than view differences as natural, school personnel viewed them as things “wrong” with the student. This implicit assumption situates the questions about the problem into an analysis of the individual student (Dudley-Marling, 2004). The
manner in which children with differences are treated in the classroom is a result of teachers’ view of difference and disability as a pathological condition. In defense of the teachers, schools as institutions create failure for some by insisting “everyone do better than everyone else” (McDermott, 1993, p.274). By referring some students to special education it offers an easy explanation for school failure, which maintains the legitimacy of conventional schooling by locating the learning problems in the individual student (Dudley-Marling, 2004).

Another way one might go about changing the teachers’ thinking about students who are performing below the teachers’ tolerance area, would be to create schools as communities that recognize and embrace all differences. Differences could then become ordinary and acceptable. If schools adopted more inclusive practices, they would have the potential to transform the structure of classrooms and the manner in which children with differences are treated (Baglieri & Knopf, 2004). Rather than continue the current structure of systematically segregating those whom the teachers view as “not normal” from the “normal” students, the adoption of inclusive practices could put an end to that systematic educational flaw.

It is time for educational systems to embrace their responsibility to adjust to the developmental needs and levels of the children they serve, rather than expecting the children to adjust to a system that the National Association for the Education of Young Children argues is inattentive to their needs (Pianta & LaParo, 2000). Educators fail students when they expect all students to perform in the same way, in accordance with a prescribed time-table. The norms which are brought by each teacher to her classroom
have set certain students up for failure when the teachers are disinclined to modify
teaching practices. A better alternative is for teachers to accept the differing
developmental need and levels of children and adjust their teaching practices rather than
refer them to special education.

In summary, after considering the above implications, perhaps special education
as a separate category is not needed at all. If schools were restructured to recognize
learner variance as normal, then referring them to special education would be
unnecessary. Teachers would need to be given the resources to support the varied
differences in the classrooms, but if the resources were something other than special
education support, then there would be no need for special education. This idea has a
snowball effect, for teacher preparation programs would need to be restructured so future
teachers would not be indoctrinated into thinking of difference as separate and special.
Teacher preparation programs would consist of intellectual thinking about how teachers
could teach all students, whatever they may bring to the classroom.

Further research needs to be done in the area of special education referrals. One
might wonder if Flicker Elementary was typical in its approach to the referral process.
There has been much research on how to identify learning disabilities (Gerber, 2005;
Kavale, 2005; Petersen & Shinn, 2002) but more needs to be conducted on the thinking
behind the decisions teachers make when deciding to refer a student to special education.
It is the teachers, in most cases, who have the power to influence the process. It is they
who need to be studied, not the procedures, not the students, not the system. Thinking
human beings make decisions. What is the teachers’ thinking?
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