

NEGOTIATING THE ROLE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER IN THE CONTEXT  
OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

By

ELIZABETH A. FILIPPI

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To my children Katherine Alexandra, Andrew Jacob, Ian Michael,  
and to the memory of my son Adrian Rhys

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ARRA	American Recovery and Reinvestment Act
BD	Behavior Disorders
CEC	Council for Exceptional Children
ESE	Exceptional Student Education
ESEA	Elementary and Secondary Education Act
DAC	Data Accountability Center
FAPE	Free and Appropriate Public Education
FCIM	Florida Continuous Improvement Model
FLDOE	Florida Department of Education
FRL	Free or Reduced price Lunch
GET	General Education Teacher
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IEP	Individual Education Plan
LD	Learning Disabilities
LRE	Least Restrictive Environment
MTSS	Multi-tiered Systems of Support
NBPTS	National Board for Professional Teaching Standards
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
OSEP	Office of Special Education Programs
PBS	Positive Behavioral Support
RtI	Response to Intervention
RTTT	Race to the Top
SASS	Schools and Staffing Surveys
SET	Special Education Teacher

SLD	Specific Learning Disabilities
SWPBS	School Wide Model of Positive Behavioral Supports
TFS	Teacher Follow Up Survey
TPB	Theory of Planned Behavior
VAM	Value Added Model

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Elizabeth A. Filippi

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Ambiguity surrounds the role of the special education teacher in contemporary elementary schools, where multi-tiered systems of supports have emerged as a prevalent organizational structure. The purpose of this case study was to explore how special education teachers in elementary schools understand, explain, and enact their roles. Policies that govern and literature that informs special education teaching were reviewed. Three experienced elementary special education teachers serving students with disabilities who are included in general education classrooms for the majority of the school day were interviewed and observed to gain insight into their work lives. Special educator role expectations, responsibilities, and decision making regarding role enactment were examined using a three interview format proposed by Seidman (2006). Interview questions drew on the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) to uncover participants' attitudes toward special education teaching, social norms surrounding special educators' roles, and perceived control over enactment of special educators' roles. The study took place within one medium sized school district that has implemented multi-tiered frameworks for student supports in all schools. Findings suggested that the use of a multi-tiered framework for instruction and intervention in

combination with other contextual features of the workplace influenced special educators' role related decision making. Emergent themes indicate that these educators were driven internally to pursue and remain in special education careers. They demonstrated commitment to the field of special education and a learner-centered focus; they also felt an urgency regarding the scarcity of instructional time. These special educators believed colleagues within their school communities regarded their roles as legitimate, yet were conscious that others had multiple and varied expectations of them. Consequently, they saw a continued need to advocate for students with special education needs within their schools. Many aspects of their work were not within their control, so these special educators were flexible, continually adapting to their environment, exerting control where they could. In explaining the ways in which they enacted their roles in the context of multi-tiered systems of support, they described the importance of special education teachers as problem-solvers, collaborators, and leaders of instruction for elementary students with disabilities, and others who struggle to learn.

## CHAPTER 1 THE PROBLEM

### **Introduction**

Early on an April morning, outside a large ballroom at the 2011 national convention of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the doors were closed and locked. Disappointed would-be attendees were turned away from the meeting inside, informed that the room had reached capacity and fire codes restricted further entry. What was inside that was in such demand? Those of us who had arrived earlier were privileged to hear approximately two dozen of America's preeminent scholars and advocates discuss their views of what the future of special education and special education teaching should be. That this round table discussion and a similarly focused town hall meeting the evening before were both filled to capacity revealed both scholarly and grassroots awareness that the role of the special education teacher in today's schools is a topic of import. In January, 2011, Douglas Fuchs called for "a collective rethinking of special education and the role of special educators in our nation's schools" (The Brookings Institution, p.9). The concern about special educators' jobs is not new. It has been more than a decade since a special task force of CEC (2000) reported the need for clearly defined roles for special educators. In 2011 the role of the special education teacher (SET) remains unclear.

As role expectations for SETs evolve, tensions arise in meeting the range of demands within those roles. Special educators are asked to assume multiple responsibilities in raising the academic achievement of individual students, and in contributing to the academic standing of their schools. As they work to teach students with exceptional needs, special education teachers are buffeted by regulations set forth

through sometimes conflicting national, state and local policies, as well as district and school level organizational and administrative mandates. Ultimately, however, policy implementation happens at the teacher level: “What happens at the school and classroom is most often mediated by teachers’ practices, how teachers interact with colleagues and families, and how these relationships are embedded in the larger community” (Ferretti & Eisenman, 2010, p. 380). It is the individual special education teacher who must choose what actions to take day-to-day. This study will explore how SETs understand their roles, the influences that guide their work, and how they make decisions regarding role enactment.

### **The Changing Context of Special Education**

National education policy has led to a transformation in the ways children are schooled. The 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that individualized education programs (IEPs) delineate how students with disabilities will be supported to participate in and make progress toward the general education curriculum and assessments, and to explain the extent to which students will not be instructed within the general education classroom (34 C.F.R §§ 300.320-300.324). According to the Office of Special Education Programs, Data Accountability Center (OSEP, DAC), in our nation, of the nearly six million students ages 6-21 served through the IDEA in fall of 2009, nearly three and a half million spent more than 80% of the school day in general education classrooms. Another 1.2 million students with disabilities spent 40%-70% of their school day in general education classes (OSEP, DAC, 2010). The expectation for most of these students is that they will meet general education academic standards.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001 (ESEA), also known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), has a stated goal of all students reaching grade level standards. States developed assessment systems to monitor student achievement. State and federal accountability systems were devised to monitor school and district progress as well as to provide rewards and sanctions. Most students with disabilities are assessed on grade level standards using the same assessments as the general education students, sometimes with accommodations. Some students with disabilities qualify for alternate assessments. Accountability systems look at students with disabilities as an aggregate subset of a school's population. Consideration of students with disabilities as a group is a step away from the focus on the individual student that is a pillar of the IDEA and of special education teaching as it has traditionally been conceived and delivered.

There is evidence that teachers influence student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Goldhaber, 2002; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005). The national discourse on teaching has moved from identifying teachers as highly qualified (NCLB, 2001) to identifying teachers as effective (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Through the Race to the Top Fund (RTTT), part of the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA)*, federal funding mechanisms are tying states' grants to teacher evaluation, composed in part with results of student achievement. Evaluations of teacher preparation programs will be linked to the achievement and growth of their graduates' students. The ability of measures to link student achievement to teachers will rest upon determining what part of a student's educational experience was delivered by which teacher. The inclusion of students with special education needs

in general education programs poses challenges for identifying just who is responsible for the teaching of whom. In order to assign values to teacher input, the role of SETs in the education of their students will have to be determined.

### **The Changing Roles of Special Education Teachers**

In 2007 nearly 400,000 teachers were employed nationwide to work with students ages 6-21 receiving special education services under IDEA (OSEP, DAC, 2010). SETs may be assigned to teach students with a variety of abilities and categorical disabilities, whether mild, moderate or severe in intensity (Youngs, Jones, & Low, 2011). Special educators use a variety of methods, strategies, and curricula to deliver both content and strategy instruction to students, and are expected to modify or adapt these as needed for individual learners (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010). Expectations for SETs often involve collaborating with and guiding general education teachers to more effectively teach students with special education needs who are participating in general education classroom instruction. This work often transpires across several grade levels, service delivery settings, and multiple tiers of support (Brownell, Billingsley, McLeskey & Sindelar, 2012). These SETs may also be called on to participate in the process of determining students' eligibility for special education services (Wyatt-Ross, 2007). SETs are decision makers. "Everything an accomplished teacher knows through study, research, and experience is brought to bear daily in the classroom through innumerable decisions that shape learning. Teaching frequently requires balancing the demands of several important educational goals" (NBPTS, 2010, p. 16). The kinds of decisions SETs are called on to make can differ from, and sometimes extend beyond those made by their general education teaching colleagues.

## **The Changing Conditions of Service Delivery**

Role ambiguity for SETs has historically been an issue. During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, what Brownell et al. (2010) call the “categorical era” (p. 361), SETs were assumed to have knowledge of specific disabilities, assessments, and interventions. A diagnostic-prescriptive approach was taken to teaching. In the non categorical era (Brownell et al.), from the 1970s through the 1980s, behavioral methods for teaching and classroom management, direct instruction, and the use of curriculum-based measurement to “validate the effectiveness of interventions” (p. 362) were the tools of SETs. Throughout this time special education was delivered for the most part in special schools, self-contained special education classrooms, or in separate resource rooms. In the 1990s the integrated era began (Brownell et al.). The place where special education services were delivered changed dramatically in some schools. Self-contained classrooms, along with the isolation and independence that accompanied them, became a less frequently seen place of service. Teachers now had to respond to calls for students with disabilities to be included in general education classrooms, taught by general education teachers. SETs were called on to consult, collaborate, and teach with general education teachers to assist them in providing instruction to students with disabilities.

In the current national discussion about what role a special education teacher (SET) should perform in public schools, Simonsen et al. (2010) suggest that the SET should take a wide-ranging role requiring a varied skill set. The SET should be redefined as an interventionist within a schoolwide model of instruction and supports (Simonsen et al.). A proposal advanced by Zigmond (2007) suggests that two individuals fill two roles for special educators: one a teacher of children, the other a

consultant, providing job embedded professional development to teachers. A perspective offered by McLeskey and Waldron (2011) suggests that SETs roles be limited to providing high quality instruction in basic skill areas, supporting general education classroom teachers in delivering high quality instruction, and monitoring progress of individual students as well as the placements and programs of those students.

Special educators are asked to demonstrate both wide ranging and thorough knowledge of disabilities and teaching. Along with deep understanding of domain specific content and pedagogy, there is a need for the special educator to exhibit expertise in disability-specific knowledge, providing evidence based intervention, making adaptations to curriculum, environment and materials, and in assessment and progress monitoring (Brownell et al., 2010). Brownell and her colleagues suggest that the SET in a school must add value to the general education a student with disabilities receives, which is increasingly provided through varying levels of instructional support

A component of many contemporary elementary schools is the use of a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), a framework that may be considered a defining feature of the teaching context. Use of MTSS has the potential to influence the role and utilization of the SET and to impact the numbers of students in need of special education (Torgesen, 2009).

### **Why This Problem Needs to be Studied**

Those concerned with the education of all children call for high quality, effective SETs in the schools. Three factors that influence both the quality and the effectiveness of that labor pool include: “(1) shortages and surpluses (supply, demand, and retention); (2) professional knowledge and skills (initial preparation, induction, and continuing

professional development); and (3) conditions of service (work context and assignment)” (Billingsley, 2011, p.393).

Special education has faced chronic shortages of qualified teachers (McLeskey, Tyler & Flippen, 2004), and context is thought to play a role in teacher retention and decision making (Billingsley, 2004; Gersten et al, 2001). In their 2001 study of factors contributing to SETs’ decisions to remain in special education teaching or to leave the field, Gersten et al. found that stress stemming from job design was a leading detrimental factor. Data indicated that role dissonance, differences between teachers’ job expectations and the requirements of the job, was a strong predictor of such stress. The authors were concerned with whether the job of SET was “designed in such a way that teachers can be productive” (p. 552). The authors pointed out that “seriously addressing the design of the special educator’s job is a critical national need” (p.563).

Current education policies require that school, district, and teacher evaluations be linked to student achievement. Given this imperative, it is important to decipher the role of SETs in their students’ accomplishments. SETs are expected to manage a variety of tasks in the execution of their roles: providing instruction, collaborating, completing procedural requirements, and supervising paraprofessionals (Brownell et al., 2010). Observational time use studies suggest that little instructional time is spent in effective instructional practices, thus impeding student opportunities for learning (Deshler & Cornett, 2011; Swanson, 2008; Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010). These data beg the question of why SETs are not using their time to teach.

Not only are SET roles ill-defined, it is unclear how SETs make decisions about what to do within their positions. In discussing teacher effectiveness, Brownell et al.

(2012) point out that teacher roles are being redefined in contemporary schools and underscore the importance of ascertaining how district, school, classroom, and teacher variables influence the work that SETs do. One way to learn about how the interactions of these variables may influence SETs' decision making about their roles is to ask teachers directly.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to explore how SETs in contemporary schools understand their roles and the influences that guide their work. The study describes the contexts in which selected SETs practice, the work these teachers do, and probes their decision-making regarding their role enactment.

### **Research Questions**

This study is guided by the following overall question: How do elementary school SETs understand, explain, and enact their roles? A subordinate question is how do SETs negotiate ambiguities that may arise within their role?

### **Theoretical Framework**

It is reasonable to look at SETs within the context of their work lives. To appreciate the perspective of SETs as they enact their roles within elementary schools this study will use qualitative case study methods to examine, from a constructionist epistemology, how SETs construct meaning as they “engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty, 1998. P. 43). To guide the process of examining how SETs choose to enact their roles, this case study will employ a theoretical framework that involves decision making for taking action, the theory of planned behavior (TPB).

The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) grew out of earlier work of Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), the theory of reasoned action, and has roots in Bandura's work on

self-efficacy. According to the theory of planned behavior, people's behavior is shaped by three types of beliefs. A person's beliefs about attributes of a behavior or the possible consequences of performing a behavior lead to the person's *attitudes about the behavior*. What a person believes about the normative expectations of others regarding the behavior, or perceives as social pressure, yields the *subjective norm*. What a person believes about the presence of factors that get in the way of or assist in performing the behavior leads to *perceived behavioral control*, the "perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior" (Ajzen, 2002, p. 665). Taken together these three considerations--attitudes about the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control--form behavioral intention. Given optimal conditions, intended behavior is often carried out.

Ajzen's theory of planned behavior has been established in quantitative research to predict and explain human social behavior and has been used as a framework to design behavioral change interventions (Ajzen, 2011). A meta-analytic review of research (Armitage & Conner, 2001) furnished support for the efficacy of TPB to predict intention and behavior.

The theory of planned behavior has also been used as a conceptual framework in qualitative studies. In her study of motivational factors for registered nurses completing a baccalaureate program Alonzo (2009) used the theory of planned behavior to develop focus group questions. Using a mixed method approach, Sugar, Crawley and Fine (2004) used the TPB to explain teacher's decisions about technology adoption. The TPB was used to organize the results of the semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires completed with six teacher participants. Salient beliefs identified through

this process were used to develop the closed-ended questionnaire then distributed to the entire school faculty. Deskins, Harris, Bradlyn, Cottrell, Coffman, Olexa and Neal (2006) applied the TPB as the guiding framework in a qualitative study of participation in cholesterol screenings to explain barriers perceived by residents of Appalachia. Interviews and focus groups were the methods of data collection. The three components of TPB, attitudes about behavior, social norms, and perceived behavioral control were used as a framework in presenting results. Ajzen noted that although the theory of planned behavior was developed for prediction and the standard methods of quantitative analysis, the theory may be used in qualitative research as a guiding framework for developing questions, and in the eliciting and coding of beliefs (<http://people.umass.edu/aizen/contact.html>). In the present study the theory of planned behavior was used to develop interview questions aligned with the three component domains, and to guide the organization and analysis of data.

### **Overview of Methods**

This qualitative inquiry used a multisite case study method. “Case study research is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (Merriam, 2009, p.40). For this investigation the case is comprised of SETs practicing in elementary schools in one Florida school system. The context of the SETs’ work is integral to understanding the role the teacher assumes. Case study research honors the importance of context in experience. Case study can be described as particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic (Merriam, 2009). The particularistic nature of case study reflects the decision to examine a focused group of teachers who practice the role of special educator in the context of changing policy and practical requirements. The descriptive nature of case study provides a window into the practice of special

education teaching as experienced by SETs at the particular interface of the forces of law, policy, professional requirements, personal values, attitudes, and understandings. The heuristic nature of case study is intended to lead to insights regarding the work of SETs.

Seidman (2006) suggested that experience is best understood within the circumstances surrounding it; therefore, he recommended a series of three in-depth interviews in order to explore people's behavior within the context of their lives. The first interview is a focused life history asking the participant to illuminate their lives up to the present. The second interview asks participants to give details of their present experience. The third interview asks the participants to reflect on their past and present and express how they make sense of them. SET participants in this study were interviewed three times according to this framework. Additional data relating to the context of the SETs work lives were collected through document retrieval, and observations of the teacher's workday.

### **Delimitations/Limitations/Assumptions**

This study is intended to be an in-depth look at selected SETs in public elementary schools in one school district in Florida. The roles that these SETs assume within their schools and how they make decisions regarding enactment of those roles are individualized and linked to the contexts of the particular schools in which these SETs work. The degree to which a reader could transfer the findings from this study would depend upon how similar a situation might be to the situation described for these teacher participants. As the researcher I made every effort to provide sufficient detail to offer the reader the opportunity for such decision making.

## Definitions

Several Terms warrant definition for the purposes of this study.

**Special education teacher (SET):** A teacher with special education certification who teaches in a public school and whose student caseload is composed of students identified as having a disability resulting in a need for special education services. For this study the selected SETs served students with high incidence disabilities who are taught in general education classes for most of the school day.

**Special education teacher role:** Role refers to the position of the SET within the school community, including the functions performed, duties, responsibilities, and social behavior.

**Multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS):** Perhaps the most frequently heard name for a multi-tiered model is response to intervention (RtI), which is used to discuss a continuum of academic supports that increase in intensity. A similarly tiered system of behavioral supports is known as positive behavior supports or PBS. Because the RtI and PBS models are similar in structure and each relies on evidence based practices and decision making informed by assessment data, the term MTSS will be used to encompass both.

## Significance of the Study

Results of this study should contribute to the body of research on SET roles. Specifically the findings provide an in-depth look at the jobs SETs are performing in contemporary elementary schools and the ways in which SETs make decisions about their roles. Study results could also provide information to guide the deployment of SETs in schools, SETs' effectiveness and leadership at the school level, professional development needs, and teacher education programs.

## **Overview of the Dissertation**

This dissertation provides a qualitative multiple case study. Data collected through interviews with SETs, as well as teacher observations and document review, were analyzed within and across cases to determine commonalities that influence the SETs' enactments of their roles.

Chapter one of the dissertation introduces the topic, states the purpose of the study, and identifies the research questions. The theoretical framework, delimiters, and limitations of the study are introduced. Chapter two provides an examination of the issue through a review of relevant policy at federal, state, and local levels followed by a brief historical view of special education teaching and discussion of concerns about the role of SETs in contemporary schools. Research studies regarding the roles of SETs are reviewed and synthesized. Chapter three provides a description of the methodology, study design, data collection and analysis that were used to conduct the study. The use of case study, the use of the three part interview and the theoretical framework from which questions were developed are explained. Chapter four illuminates findings from data in the form of SET profiles. Chapter five presents the findings from a cross case analysis with a discussion of related literature. Chapter six provides conclusions, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH

Clarifying the role of special education teachers and understanding how SETs navigate influences defining their roles has the potential to help administrators keep their schools staffed with effective SETs, aid teacher preparation programs and staff development personnel to provide targeted training experiences, support SETs, and allow students to benefit from sustained effective teaching.

Nearly 400,000 SETs are employed nationwide to work with school-age students receiving special education services under IDEA (OSEP, DAC, 2009). Boe, Cook and Sunderland (2008), using three versions of the Schools and Staffing Surveys (SASS) and their follow up components, the Teacher Follow Up Surveys (TFS), investigated teacher turnover in public schools from 1990-2001. Annually nearly 23% of SETs either left teaching, switched schools, or changed teaching areas during the 1990s. The percentages of special educators who left the profession of teaching after 1 to 3 years was similar to those of general education teachers, as was the case with SETs with 4 to 12 years of experience. However, SETs with 13 to 24 years of experience were twice as likely to leave the teaching profession annually than were general education teachers. This amount of turnover has an effect on children and schools, including financial costs and the organizational management of retraining migrating teachers and inducting new personnel.

Boe et al. (2008) recommended “the most promising approach to reduce teacher shortages is to increase the supply of qualified teachers” (p. 25). A question to ask when attempting to increase the supply of qualified teachers is “qualified to do what?” This question leads to investigating the role of the SET.

The role performed by special educators in today's schools is unclear in both policy and practice. Currently there is a national discussion about what role a SET should perform in public schools. Although there are differences of opinion about what that role should be, the call for definition has been repeated (Brownell et al, 2010; Fuchs, 2011; Simonsen, et. al, 2010).

How individual SETs determine what their roles are in their own schools, and how they choose to perform those roles is also unclear. The search for insight into SETs' understanding of and decision making regarding their roles begins with the awareness that two forces influence the provision of special education services in contemporary schools: (a) the educational policies that provide governance, and (b) the educational research that offers guidance (Bateman, 2007; Crockett, Filippi, & Morgan, 2012). In this chapter policy at national, state, and local levels is examined first for definitions that govern the role of the special education teacher. Next, research that guides and informs the role of SETs is reviewed.

### **Policy Regarding the Role of the Special Education Teacher**

National, state and local policies influence special education and the work of the SET. Policies at each level are examined with regard to defining the role of the SET, and stipulating the school context in which the role is performed. Specifically, Florida has implemented a multi-tiered system of academic intervention and positive behavioral supports to be applied throughout schools in the state. State and local policy regarding this framework is outlined because of its potential to affect the context of the SET's work. In an effort to locate definitions in national educational policy, a search for the term *special education teacher* was conducted electronically using Microsoft Word and Adobe Reader in the texts of IDEA 2004 and ESEA 2001.

## **IDEA and the Special Education Teacher**

The IDEA 2004 does not define a SET or describe the role, but the statute does specify requirements, that to be considered highly qualified, a SET (a) has obtained full state certification or passed a state licensure examination, and holds licensure as a SET; (b) has not had licensure requirements waived on an emergency, temporary or provisional basis; and (c) holds at least a bachelor's degree (20 USC 1401 (10)(A)(i)(ii)(iii)). A highly qualified SET must demonstrate competency in subject matter knowledge for any core subject taught (Yell, 2012).

Language in sections of the IDEA devoted to funding for personnel preparation and for professional development grants provided more guidance as to what may be expected of SETs. Professional development grant funds are to be used to provide activities that support both SETs and general education teachers, such as programs that provide mentoring, team-teaching, reduced class schedules, and reduced caseloads (20USC 1454 §.654(a) (1) (A)); encourage collaborative and consultative models of special education service delivery (20USC 1454 (a)(1)(C)); and encourage and support SETs to use and integrate technology into curriculum and instruction (20USC 1454 (a)(2)). These activities should also increase knowledge about: academic and developmental needs of students with disabilities, instructional strategies, collaborating within groups of teachers, positive behavioral interventions and supports, reading and early literacy, interventions to help identify (not misidentify) students with disabilities, classroom based techniques to use prior to referral for special education, planning, developing and implementing effective IEPs and conducting effective IEP meetings (20USC 1454 (a)(3)).

State education agencies are expected to reform certification so that SETs and general education teachers have the knowledge to meet the full range of needs across disability categories, demonstrate subject matter knowledge in subjects they teach, and have the instructional skills needed to teach students with disabilities to meet challenging academic and functional standards (20USC 1454 (b)(1)(C)). Grant funding provides for development or improvement of existing programs that prepare personnel, including teachers and principals, to work collaboratively in general education settings; use appropriate curriculum modifications, accommodations and supports for students; implement effective teaching strategies, classroom-based techniques, and interventions to ensure appropriate identification of students who may be eligible for special education services; work effectively with families; use behavior strategies and supports for students with disabilities; effectively construct and implement IEPs, and participate in IEP meetings (20 USC 1462 (b)(2)(A)(i-vi)). Personnel also are to prepare students with disabilities to participate in statewide assessments or alternative assessments (20 USC 1462 (b)(2)(A)(vii)).

Governance from IDEA directs SETs to collaborate with other professionals and families, participate in IEP development and implementation, provide instruction, and to assess students. SETs are expected to be knowledgeable about disabilities, subject matter, instructional approaches and interventions, behavior, and how to adapt and modify curriculum.

### **ESEA and the Special Education Teacher**

The ESEA similarly provides no definition for the role of SET. The ESEA 2001 did establish that SETs were to be provided professional development along with general education teachers through Reading First (20 U.S.C. 6361 (2)), and specified

that local education agencies' had an option of hiring SETs to team teach in classes containing students with and without disabilities (20 U.S.C. 6623 (C)(i)). An electronic search using the term *highly qualified* revealed language stating that funds can be used to hire highly qualified teachers of students with special needs to provide increased individualized instruction to children (20 U.S.C. 6623 (C)(ii)). ESEA provides funding for professional development activities for both general education and SETs. One endorsed area of training is the use of research-based methods for students with special educational needs (Yell, 2011). A further reference regarding the role of SETs is the responsibility for planning and supervising instructional activities provided by paraprofessionals and assessing the achievement of students instructed by paraprofessionals (Yell). Governance from ESEA indicates the role of the SET involves collaboration with general education teachers and providing intervention to students.

### **Florida Regulations for Exceptional Student Education Teachers**

In the State of Florida, where this study is being conducted, special education is called *Exceptional Student Education* (ESE). Both the terms "special education teacher" and "exceptional student education teacher" were used in the electronic search carried out on excerpts from the Florida Statutes and State Board of Education rules related to exceptional student education (FLDOE, 2011a). The State statutes, chapter 1012.56, and rules, chapter 6A-4, stipulate SET certification requirements. State department of education rules regarding special education specify only two role responsibilities for SETs: (a) a SET must participate in a student's IEP meeting and has responsibilities for development and implementation of a student's IEP (Rule 6A-6.03028 (3)(b)10.(c)a.3.); and (b) under certain circumstances a SET must be consulted regarding the need for instruction and services for students with disabilities who have been suspended,

expelled or placed in an interim alternative educational placement (Rule 6A-6.03312 (5)(c)). The FLDOE (2010) identifies educator accomplished practices in Rule 6A-5.065. Because these practices are not differentiated by position, one can assume that all teachers, including SETs, are expected to demonstrate their use. These practices include lesson planning and instructional design that is aligned with state academic standards; managing learning environments that are “safe, organized, equitable, flexible, inclusive, and collaborative” (6A-5.065 (2) 2); instructional delivery that is challenging and engaging; assessment practices that inform instruction; continuous professional improvement; and ethical conduct.

### **School District Policy Regarding Exceptional Student Education Teachers**

The 2010 special education policies and procedures for the school district in which this study was conducted indicate that SETs are trained to design and implement IEPs, and to instruct students to allow them to access and benefit from the core curriculum. Special educators may teach students in skill areas that include use of “curriculum and learning strategies, compensatory skills, functional skills, social/emotional behavior, use of assistive technology, and communication” (p.52). The district human resources department provides a 2010 job description for an exceptional student education teacher (SET) that lists 52 essential duties, the first of which is to create or select short and long-range plans and write student’s annual IEP based on a review of district and state curriculum priorities, instructional priorities and student’s disability. Collectively, the duties of the SET include collaboration, assessment, instruction, and IEP development and implementation.

A close review of policies governing special education revealed no national definition of the role of SETs. At the state level two responsibilities were enumerated:

(a) development and implementation of the student's IEP, and (b) consultation in certain disciplinary situations. At the local level, the role is delineated more specifically. At the national level, there is clearly communication within IDEA and NCLB that the SET has responsibilities for instruction and intervention with students, collaboration and consultation with families and other professionals, and assessment of students. Alignment of instruction for students with disabilities with general education academic standards and curriculum is present at all three levels of governance. At the state level expectations for performance of accomplished practices for special educators are not differentiated from those for general educators. It appears that although the role of the SET is not defined in law, some of the associated responsibilities are identified.

### **State and Local Directives for Tiered Support**

Florida Board of Education rules outline the use of Response to Intervention (RtI) in determining eligibility for exceptional student education for students with language impairments (Rule 6A-6.030121(6)(b)2) and students with specific learning disabilities (Rule 6A-6.03018(2)(b)). These rules direct local school districts to develop procedures for general education evidence-based intervention for students who need additional academic and behavioral support to succeed in the general education environment (6A-6.0331(1)). Student performance data is to be used as when choosing interventions and monitoring progress (6A-6.0331(1)(e)).

The State has developed an implementation plan for a state-wide multi-tiered system of supports for K-12 students in both general and special education. In a keynote address to the Leadership Institute on Developing a Multi-tiered System of Student Supports in Florida, the Bureau Chief for Exceptional Student Education and Student Services maintained that the "changing face of monitoring and compliance

necessitates unification of general and special education efforts within the multi-tiered system of student supports” (Lockman, 2011, slide 8). This vision of a unified framework integrates the work of the Florida Problem Solving/Response to Intervention (PS/Rtl) and Florida Positive Behavior Supports: Rtl Behavior (FLPBS:RtlB), two initiatives that have been steering the implementation of Rtl in the state, to “inform the *development, implementation, and ongoing evaluation of an integrated, aligned, and sustainable system of service delivery* that prepares all students for *post-secondary education and/or successful employment within our global society*” (Batsche & Kincaid, 2011, slide 13, emphasis in original). The local school district describes its procedures for carrying out evaluations and required general education interventions using a three-tiered Rtl framework in its 2010 Exceptional Student Education Special Policies and Procedures document. The assessment and intervention activities at each of the three tiers are detailed and teams of school personnel are identified for decision making at each level. Student responses to interventions during instruction are part of the data utilized in evaluations determining eligibility for special services due to language impairments or specific learning disabilities.

The preceding review of policies governing special education suggests four dimensions within the role of the special educator: (a) collaboration, (b) assessment, (c) instruction and intervention, and (d) IEP development and implementation. State and local policies also prescribe the context in which that teaching is to take place as using a multi-tiered approach to supporting students. In the following section, research that guides and informs the role of the special education teacher is considered.

## **Literature Informing the Role of the Special Education Teacher**

Literature informing the SET's role was identified through a search carried out using the electronic databases Education Full Text (Wilson Web), ERIC, Professional Development Collection (EBSCOhost), JSTOR, Dissertations and Theses (PROQUEST), and Social Sciences Full Text (Wilson Web) accessed through the University of Florida library system. A number of keywords were used independently and in a variety of combinations: *special education teachers, roles, response to intervention, multi-tiered systems of support, teacher beliefs, and theory of planned behavior*. Author names were also used as search terms. Ancestral searches from articles found through the electronic search and a hand search of several journal volumes of *Exceptional Children, Teacher Education and Special Education, Remedial and Special Education, and The Journal of Special Education* were conducted, and several articles retrieved through these searches were found to be germane to the present study. Relevant literature was also provided by graduate faculty.

Following a brief account of SETs roles in recent history, literature that offers scholarly visions of the ideal role of SETs is discussed. Next, a description of multi-tiered systems of support is provided, and studies pertaining to SETs' enactment of their roles are reviewed.

### **History of the Special Educators' Role**

Role ambiguity for SETs has historically been an issue. Brownell and her colleagues (2010) provided a synopsis of the history of special education teaching from which this section is largely drawn. During the 1950s, through the 1970s, what Brownell et al. call the "categorical era" (p. 361), SETs were assumed to have knowledge of specific disabilities, assessment, and interventions. Most preparation programs were

designed with a focus on a specific disability category. A diagnostic-prescriptive approach was taken to teaching, based on a medical model. Teachers diagnosed learning and processing deficits, and then implemented a prescribed treatment. Specialized techniques, strategies, and materials based on process training were used until the efficacy of these methods was called into question (Hoover & Patton, 2008). It was near the end of this era that the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was passed in 1975, ensuring students with disabilities access to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and leading to an increased demand for SETs in public schools.

In what Brownell et al. (2010) call the non-categorical era, from the 1970s through the 1980s, behavioral methods for teaching and classroom management, direct instruction, and the use of curriculum-based measurement to “validate the effectiveness of interventions” (p. 362) were the tools of special education teachers. SETs identified learning needs, established behavioral objectives, and systematically collected data regarding the student’s progress toward meeting these objectives. Research during this time established the value of direct instruction, academic learning time, scaffolding on successes, and reinforcement schedules. Effective teachers paced instruction, provided opportunities for students to respond, and provided remediation. SETs were expected to demonstrate skill in providing interventions and managing classrooms. Throughout this time special education was delivered for the most part in special schools, self-contained special education classrooms, or in separate resource rooms, although the movement toward teaching students with disabilities in general education classes had begun (Hoover & Patton, 2008).

In the 1990s the integrated era began. The place where special education services were delivered changed dramatically in some schools. Self-contained classrooms, along with the isolation and independence that accompanied them, were used less frequently. Students with disabilities were included more often in general education classrooms, taught by general education teachers. SETs were expected to consult, collaborate, and teach with general education teachers to assist them in providing instruction to students with disabilities. Problem solving and decision making were requisite skills for special educators. A constructivist view of teaching moved into SET preparation making way for recognition that these teachers' beliefs and understandings shaped their planning and classroom activities (Brownell et al., 2010). At the start of the second decade of the millennium, several scholars voiced the need to reexamine the direction that special education teaching should take.

### **Envisioning the Role of the Special Education Teacher**

Special educators would be redefined as interventionists within a schoolwide model of instruction and supports in a design forwarded by Simonsen and her colleagues (2010). Special education interventionists would be case managers for students with disabilities, responsible for IEP development and assuring provision of specially designed instruction. The interventionist role would include providing professional development to general education teachers, consultation with general education teachers and others regarding adaptations and modifications to instruction in general education environments, collaboration to implement universal screening and progress monitoring, and providing small group instruction utilizing both specially designed instruction and environments.. The special educator's role would require a varied skill set. Specifically, special educators would need to be skilled in collecting and

interpreting data, designing and implementing interventions, providing training, coaching, consulting, and collaborating with other professionals. Simonsen et al. indicated a need to “articulate how a special educator’s role fits within the larger structure” (p. 22) of school wide supports, including MTSS.

Zigmond (2007) conceived of the special educator’s role differently as she outlined a service delivery system for students with Learning Disabilities/Behavior Disorders (LD/BD). Zigmond suggested that there be two roles for special educators responsible for students with high incidence disabilities, and that two individuals fill these roles. One role would be that of the special education *teacher*, responsible for teaching the “special stuff in a special way” (p. 119) to students with exceptional education needs. Special education is grounded in research and SETs must continue to be highly specialized in teaching individual students using intensive specially designed instruction (Zigmond & Kloo, 2011). Such teaching would include special materials, specialized equipment, explicit strategy and skill instruction and must be “relentless” (Zigmond, p. 122). The SET should have some knowledge of the core curriculum encountered by students, but the specialized knowledge of the SET is special education itself (Zigmond & Kloo).

The other role for the special educator would be that of the *consultant*, or *coach*, responsible for providing job embedded professional development to increase the capacity of general educators to teach students with disabilities enrolled in their classes. General education teachers need the pedagogy and skills to differentiate instruction for a diverse classroom population. To accomplish that end consulting SETs could provide training to general educators on modifying learning environments, adapting instruction,

and prioritizing curricular demands. Zigmond, Kloo, and Volonio (2011) note that assuring “access to the general education curriculum provided alongside general education peers is an honored tenet and valued goal of special education” (p. 201); however it does not provide the intensity of specialized programming needed by some students with special education needs.

Stemming from their long involvement in intervention research, as well as providing interventions within RtI frameworks, Lynn and Douglas Fuchs have cautioned that there are a number of students who need much more intensive intervention than can be provided in general education programs, even those programs that manage to provide high quality interventions (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998). Fuchs, Fuchs and Stecker (2010) call for the profession of special education to remember the mission it defined in the 1970s and 1980s to provide personalized clinical instruction to those students whose learning problems make them the most difficult to teach. This means once again linking assessment to teaching in a diagnostic-prescriptive sense. Fuchs et al. point out that in the decades since 1970 new technologies and a much larger cache of evidence based practices are available for both assessment and instruction.

Douglas Fuchs (2011) called for SETs who know multiple routes for teaching reading and math. He envisioned the special educator as a researcher who uses assessment to identify needs, knows how to manipulate methods and materials to provide instruction as clinical trials, collects and monitors data to determine the effectiveness of instruction/intervention, and makes decisions about the next phase of intervention. The special education teacher described here has a narrower range of responsibilities and would need small caseloads. This educator is one who specializes

in providing personalized, intensive intervention to those students with the most severe learning difficulties. From Fuchs' perspective, as specialized interventionists SETs would play a valuable role within multi-tiered systems of supports.

Brownell et al (2010) suggested that the special education teacher must add value to the general education a student with a disability receives. They noted advances in medical research on disability, educational research on teaching and learning, and advances in technology have enlarged the knowledge base available to special educators. Information and technology are becoming more available to aid teachers in understanding differences in how students learn a range of domain specific content, and in assisting students in acquiring that knowledge. For Brownell and her colleagues, SETs need to understand how a disability presents within a content area in order to provide interventions that remedy deficits in conceptual and procedural understanding. Along with deep understanding of domain specific content and pedagogy, there is a need for the special educator to exhibit expertise in disability-specific knowledge, provide evidence based intervention, make adaptations to curriculum, environment and materials, and be expert in assessment and progress monitoring.

The existence of multi-tiered frameworks to structure support and interventions in schools is a premise that undergirds Brownell and colleagues' view of the contemporary special educator's role of collaborating with general educators at all three instructional tiers, and providing instruction at tiers two and three. SETs need to be prepared to provide the most intensive of interventions, thus their skill set must not only be broad, but domain expertise must be deep. Brownell and colleagues recommended SETs

need preparation not only in special education, but also in the level of general education (elementary or secondary) where they teach in order to develop deep understanding of content specific pedagogy.

McLeskey and Waldron (2011) suggested that SETs roles be limited to three functions: (a) providing interventions, (b) collaborating with other staff, and (c) monitoring progress. First, SETs should provide high quality, intensive instruction in basic skill areas to small groups of students using effective instructional materials and techniques that have been identified in reading (Vaughn, Gersten, & Chard;2000), writing (Graham & Harris, 2005) and in mathematics ( Fuchs et al, 2009). Limiting instructional group sizes to small numbers of students with similar academic needs would allow SETs to offer students explicit, intensive, targeted instruction. It would be important that this instruction take place in addition to effective core instruction in reading and in mathematics. Second, SETs would collaborate with general education teachers to support high quality core instruction in inclusive classrooms. SETs' expertise could be tapped to develop the capacity of general education teachers to differentiate instruction. Third, SETs would monitor the progress of individual students as well as the placements and programs of those students. It is through assessment of the impact of instruction, interventions, and service delivery on student outcomes that decisions can be made about the efficacy of instructional programming. SETs should be positioned to perform systematic progress monitoring. McLeskey and Waldron share with Brownell and her colleagues (2010) a vision of special education that adds value to students' learning of the general education curriculum.

Hoover and Patton (2008) situated the role of the special education teacher within schools organized around multi-tiered instructional programming. They noted that educators are challenged to provide appropriate instruction to students at all levels of instructional need, including students with disabilities. Recognizing the mandate to provide access to the general education curriculum and to utilize evidence based practices in delivering academic instruction and behavioral supports, Hoover and Patton identified five role areas that SETs might assume to support student success within multi-tiered frameworks. These five roles include: (a) data-based decision maker; (b) implementer of evidence based interventions; (c) differentiator of instruction; (d) implementer of socio-emotional and behavioral supports; and (e) collaborator. Each of these roles consists of numerous sub skills and reflects the pillars of practice identified in the review of policy governing special educators' work. Hoover and Patton use a circular model to represent the fluidity of the performance of these roles within a multi-tiered framework (Figure 2-1).

### **The Intersection of Governance and Guidance**

The visions of various scholars regarding the roles of SETs are similar to the four pillars of practice identified in policy comprising collaboration, assessment, instruction and intervention, and IEP development. Collaboration is a major facet of the role of the special education teacher as described by each of the scholars, who discuss collaboration in terms of building the capacity of general educators to differentiate instruction, and make accommodations, modifications, and adaptations necessary in the core curriculum. Simonsen, et al. (2010) and Zigmond (2007) clearly identify one role of a special educator to be that of providing professional development. Coaching and consulting are skills special educators are likely to need. Assessment is

discussed most frequently and compellingly in terms of progress monitoring and determining intervention needs of students. McLeskey and Waldron (2011) recommend the special education teacher use student progress data in monitoring the effectiveness of programming.

Each of the scholars stressed the paramount role of providing instruction and intervention to students for whom general education is not working. This instruction should be provided in addition to core instruction in general education (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; Zigmond, 2007) and may be considered tier three in a multi-tiered system (Brownell et al, 2010; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2010). Simonsen et al. (2010) addressed IEP development as a part of the role of the special education teacher. Hoover and Patton (2008) subsumed IEP development within their collaborator role. Zigmond (2007) spoke of the IEP in terms of what it should direct the special education teacher to do, which is teach skills and content that are not part of the general education curriculum. Neither McLeskey and Waldron (2011) nor Brownell et al. (2010) referred to the IEP as it related to the role of the special educator.

In reviewing research on the delivery of instruction in inclusive general education classrooms and resource rooms, McLeskey and Waldron (2011) determined that high quality instruction provided to students in general education classes could meet the needs of some students with specific learning disabilities, but was rarely intensive enough or explicit enough to benefit those students needing more specialized adaptations. Nor was instruction in separate resource rooms meeting student needs in the research they reviewed, indicating that contextual variables in resource rooms, including large class size, heterogeneous student populations, paperwork, and

demands on teacher time for collaborating with general education teachers, posed barriers to delivery of high quality instruction. McLeskey and Waldron suggested that a tiered system of supports may be a promising framework for delivering instruction that facilitates effective, inclusive schools.

### **Context of Special Education Teaching**

SETs face a struggle to determine what their roles should be, what their programmatic goals should be, what responsibilities to prioritize, how to organize their tasks, and how best to utilize their time (Billingsley, 2004; Zigmond, 2007). The implementation of a multi-tiered system of supports in schools as an organizing framework for services may have an impact on the special education teachers' role related decision making.

The policy focus for special education has become equitable outcomes (Brownell et al, 2010; Ferretti & Eisenberg, 2010; McLaughlin, 2010) with academic achievement of general education standards the measure. Schools and teachers are held accountable by federal and state governments as well as by parents for the performance of students with disabilities (Brownell, et al.). School reform efforts that have accompanied the ESEA have impelled the adoption of evidence based practices in classrooms. One framework designed to utilize evidence based practices in schools employs multi-tiered systems of support.

Perhaps the most familiar multi-tiered service delivery model is response to intervention (RtI), a continuum of academic supports that increase in intensity. A goal of RtI is to prevent and remediate academic difficulties (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009). Although multi-tiered systems may have varying numbers of tiers, a frequently seen model, and the one used in Florida, consists of three tiers (Fletcher & Vaughn; Fuchs &

Fuchs, 2009). At the first tier, primary prevention, core instruction is delivered to all students in the general education classroom. Universal screening to determine risk for academic failure, frequent progress monitoring, differentiation of instruction, flexible grouping, and use of accommodations to promote access to the curriculum are routine features of this tier. Students making inadequate progress would receive additional, time-limited, small group instruction at the secondary prevention tier (tier two). Typically tier two intervention is delivered by an adult using an evidence supported protocol, often a commercial product. Tutoring at this tier may be delivered by paraprofessionals or certified teachers but is generally overseen by professional support staff (Fuchs & Fuchs).

Tertiary prevention, tier three, is more intensive intervention delivered, often one-to-one, to those students for whom the first two tiers of support were inadequate. Tier three may be considered special education in some models or may continue as a more intense, enduring, frequent general education support, with special education considered an additional level (Gersten et al, 2009). Fuchs and Fuchs (2009) maintained that comprehensive evaluation following insufficient response to instruction at tiers one and two make “tertiary prevention synonymous with special education” (p. 42). SETs then would provide individualized instruction using non-standard curriculum and methods. Tier three allows for intervention that is more intensive, of longer duration, or is more frequent than that provided at tier two. Fuchs and Fuchs present a vision of MTSS that includes the use at tier two of standard, research validated instructional protocols that have duration, intensity and frequency built in, thus providing evaluative information through their standardized use.

A similarly tiered system of behavioral supports is known as positive behavior supports or PBS. Sugai and Horner (2009) describe a school wide model of positive behavioral supports (SWPBS) that is comprised of a continuum of three levels of intervention intensity with problem solving decisions based on student performance data. RtI and PBS models are similar in structure and each relies on evidence based practices and decision making informed by assessment data. Sugai and Horner point out that MTSS cannot be seen only as a component of special education. A premise of tiered instruction is the prevention of identified problems from becoming more severe by providing early intervention (Hoover & Patton, 2008).

Primary prevention exists at the school level and the universal nature of these interventions make teachers in all general education classrooms responsible for providing evidence based practices and making performance data based decisions. Specially designed instruction and accommodations identified through the individualized educational program (IEP) could be provided to students within any tier (Simonsen, et al., 2010). Hoover and Patton also promote a fluid model for multi-tiered instructional programming. The model they propose is circular, rather than the triangular shape most often associated with such models (Figure 2-2). The circular form represents the interconnectedness of the core, supplemental, and intensive instruction, and the dynamic nature of the process.

Another purpose for the layered interventions delivered through MTSS is the accurate identification of students with learning disabilities. Three criteria should be used to determine the presence of learning disabilities: (a) lack of adequate responsiveness to instruction through increasingly intensive interventions; (b) low

achievement; (c) the absence of another disability or environmental/contextual factors that could cause low achievement (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009). The data recording students' performance on interventions provided to at risk students in tiers one and two would become part of the evaluation information. Hoover and Patton, (2008) recommended SETs be involved in collaborative efforts and direct support to students at tiers one and two as a way to provide consistent support to students who may later be determined in need of special education.

In Florida schools a multi-tiered system that integrates RtI and PBS (illustrated in Figure 2-3) is a policy priority. The use of such a system is meant to provide an organizational structure to support effective instruction, organize allocation of resources based on student need, and implement tiered support for continued growth (Lockman, 2011b, slide 119). The merging of RtI and PBS points to the importance of teaching all students both academics and behavior (Algozzine, Wang, & Violette, 2011).

Multi-tiered systems of support are becoming a defining feature of the context in which special education is delivered. How the special educator is situated within that context remains uncertain. Vannest and Hagan-Burke (2010) put it well. "This moving target of role expectations leaves special educators with an identity crisis" (p. 126). They and others have attempted to identify what the role entails. A review of research that examines the role of the SET in contemporary contexts follows.

### **Examining the Role of Special Education Teacher in Context**

The electronic databases and search terms used in conducting this literature review were also used to locate relevant research studies, and specific parameters were set to search for studies to include in this analysis. First, the search was limited to the time period after the year 2000, to reflect the relatively recent emergence of

inclusion and multi-tiered frameworks as defining features of school contexts. Second, studies were sought that specifically examined the roles of SETs. Third, studies set in elementary schools were preferred. Last, an effort was made to locate studies of experienced, rather than novice, SETs. Much recent research regarding SETs addressed novice teachers and induction programs. Experienced educators may offer insights into nuances of the SETs' role and challenges posed by changing contexts that would be unavailable to novice teachers. Few studies were found within the selected parameters.

Each of the five studies chosen for review delineated and examined the roles and responsibilities of SETs. Four of the studies included in this review were published in peer reviewed journals. The fifth is a dissertation chosen because it examined the role of the special education teacher within the context of RtI. All of the studies' participants included SETs at the elementary school level; however, two studies included teachers at the secondary level as well. Four studies looked at SETs serving students with high incidence disabilities. The one study of SETs serving students with low incidence disabilities was incorporated because it identified role responsibilities and provided a point of comparison to the other studies. A special education teacher may be called upon to serve both students with high incidence and low incidence disabilities within schools employing inclusive practices. One study addressing novices is included in this review specifically because it served to differentiate the SET's role from that of the general education teacher.

### **Role Expectations for Novice Teachers**

When beginning teachers enter their schools they must identify what the role expectations are and how to fulfill them. Drawing on sense-making theory, Youngs,

Jones, and Low (2011) investigated how novice special and general educators deciphered role expectations. The purpose of the study was to explain differences in role expectations between novice SETs and general education teachers (GETs) and to identify differences in how each group addressed those expectations. Through interviews and surveys of two novice SETs and two beginning GETs, disparity in expectations for their respective roles were identified and differences in how the educators addressed expectations emerged.

The study, part of a larger mixed methods examination of novice teachers, was conducted in a medium sized urban district in Michigan in which 40% of the student population qualified for free or reduced price lunch (FRL). All of the teachers were in year one or two of their careers, and were participating in the district induction and mentoring program. Each was assigned an experienced mentor in her field, but this resulted in the novice SETs' mentors not teaching at the novice's workplace. All of the teachers in the sample worked in different elementary schools. The selection criteria for teachers included having academic instruction responsibilities for grades 1-5, teaching full time, having a standard teaching certificate, and having completed a university based teacher preparation program.

Data were collected for this study through two interviews conducted with each teacher in winter and spring semesters. Question topics included interactions with SETS and GETs, interactions with mentors, instructional responsibilities, curriculum, and how the early career teachers learned of role expectations. Surveys, collected in fall and spring as part of the larger study, obtained information about quality and

frequency of contacts with mentors and key personnel, participation in induction and professional development activities, and principal–teacher relations in their schools.

Data analysis began immediately following each interview through the writing of a detailed memo capturing the tone of the interview and understandings of the interviewer. The verbatim transcriptions of interviews were analyzed electronically and by using the constant comparative method. Case reports were assembled by teaching position (GET, SET) and from these reports three emergent themes were identified: (a) curricular, instructional, and role expectations; (b) interactions with mentors and colleagues; and (c) interactions with administrators. These categories were analyzed to search for possible relationships. The researchers looked at expectations and interactions within the set of novice special educators and the set of beginning general educators, and then made comparisons across teaching assignments. The investigators reported using the combination of member checks, multiple case design, multiple methods of data collections, and peer review and debriefing to establish the validity of the interviews.

To illuminate sensemaking theory, Youngs et al. (2011) referred to the work of Coburn and of Weick, indicating that “action is based on how individuals observe or choose to focus on information within their environments, construct understandings of that information, and then act based on those understandings” (p. 6). Sensemaking relies on social interactions and negotiations, and is sensitive to social norms.

Analysis of data revealed that there were considerable differences between the experiences of novice SETs and novice GETs. In the area of curricular expectations novice SETs reported teaching the core subjects of reading, writing, and mathematics;

having to create their own curricula; making significant modifications to general education curricula; having little direction from the district as to what to teach; and seldom had colleagues within the school who used the same curriculum. Novice GETs taught multiple subjects, but were provided with curriculum, training in its use, and could access colleagues who used the same curriculum. Beginning SETs were assigned students from multiple grade levels with a wide variety of disabilities, and a wide range of learning needs; taught in multiple classrooms; and were asked to serve students not on their caseloads (in co-teaching or child study teams). Beginning GETs taught students at one grade level in one classroom and students' learning needs did not span as wide a range as those of SETs. Early career SETs had little access to other SETs who had a similar role; were unlikely to have school based mentors or colleagues who taught the same curriculum or had similar students; and had little access to mentors from other schools. Early career GETs had access to assigned mentors within their schools; one was from the same grade level.

Youngs et al. (2011) concluded that novice SETs exerted much energy in co-teaching and developing relationships with general education colleagues and spent much more time and effort in meeting curricular and role expectations than did their general education counterparts. SETs roles were often ambiguous and SETs mentors were often unfamiliar with the role expectations. For novice SETs principals were key in defining roles and in providing entre to general education colleagues. Beginning SETs met resistance to inclusive practices from some general education colleagues and experienced isolation, but obtained support from school social workers.

## **Resource Specialist to Inclusion Specialist**

The journey of one special education teacher over the course of seven years was the subject of a qualitative case study by Klingner and Vaughn (2002). The purpose of their research was to clarify the role of the SET as it emerged from that of an experienced resource special education teacher (LD specialist) to expert inclusion specialist. Inclusion was defined as full time placement of students with disabilities in the general education classroom wherein support services were provided. The study was conducted in an urban elementary school, grades K-6, beginning in 1993-1994, when the school was beginning to implement an inclusion program. That this study took place in the early days of the inclusive era makes it pertinent for inclusion in this review. Klingner and Vaughn studied this teacher's role through a change in practice (inclusion) that reformed the context of the school, paralleling the proposed study's examination of SETs' practice at a time of a change (implementation of multi-tiered supports) in school contexts.

The subject of the case study, Joyce, held a master's degree in special education, had 15 years experience as a resource teacher, and had never taught in a general education classroom. She was asked to initiate the school's inclusion program and continued in the role for the next six years with various grade levels and caseloads until she retired from teaching.

Data were gathered through individual and focus group interviews with teachers and administrators, classroom observations, notes from meetings, Joyce's journal, other documents, and a "think-aloud" procedure completed with Joyce. The individual interviews used the three interview format recommended by Seidman (2006). The first interview focused on participants' past experiences with students with special needs,

resource and inclusion models, and collaborative consultation. The second interview focused on their present experiences with those topics and the third interview was a reflection the meaning of their experiences. Data analyses were completed throughout the course of the study. As data were collected they were transcribed and analyzed. After the first year of the study categories were generated and defined. Throughout the remaining years of the investigation data were sorted into categories and finally conclusions were drawn, and then verified through member checking.

Klingner and Vaughn (2002) reported on Joyce's responsibilities for assessment practices, teaching, and consultation, as well as her interpersonal skills, the four categories that emerged from the data. Changes in assessment practices occurred with the advent of high stakes testing, an increase in required reporting of progress toward IEP goals, and more collaborative evaluation of students. With inclusion, Joyce's responsibilities for assessment of students with special education needs became more tied to the general education curriculum and more time was spent in developing, conducting and reporting assessments.

In the inclusion model instruction changed from being skill based and not particularly connected to the general curriculum to being bound to the general education curriculum. General education co-teachers had different expectations for Joyce's role and differed in the extent to which they shared control of their classrooms. Joyce felt the loss of her own space as she worked solely in general education classrooms. She also lost an exclusive relationship with her students needing special education, even as she felt more responsible for all of the students in the inclusive classroom. Over time

increased use of small groups and centers allowed for more explicit instruction and reduced the need for modifications to whole group instruction.

Joyce's SET role as an inclusion specialist was complex and ever changing. It required flexibility and excellent interpersonal and communication skills. Necessary skills and knowledge included: assessment and intervention; adapting and accommodating lessons and assignments; understanding the general education curriculum; ability to co-plan, collaborate and co-teach; and commitment. Sustaining a focus on the individual student with special education needs within the instructional context of the larger group was extremely challenging. Much time and labor went into adapting instruction and as years went by Joyce was less likely to develop alternative instructional activities for included students with disabilities. Tangible administrative support targeted at the inclusion model waned over the years as increased pressure to demonstrate student academic achievement through high stakes testing was applied by federal, state and local policies. Other challenges to carrying out the role were lost planning time for collaboration, additional duties outside of the classroom, increased class size, and increased IEP paperwork.

Klingner and Vaughn (2002) concluded that SETs need knowledge about disability, and need expert teaching skills, particularly as those skills are used with students with LD. Four themes emerged to describe the work of the inclusion teacher: assessment practices, teaching, consultation, and interpersonal skills. These reflect the practices identified through review of policy and are found in the discourse regarding special education teacher roles discussed earlier in this chapter. The teacher made decisions about how her role should be carried out. How she performed the role

changed over time as the context of the work site changed; for instance, as the level of administrative support for co-planning decreased, the time spent on co-planning decreased.

### **Special Education Teaching Within an Rtl Framework**

As students with disabilities have been increasingly included in general education and the student population in general education has become more diverse, an emphasis on early intervening services and prevention prevails. The use of multiple tiers of intervention is a framework that has been gaining momentum as a way to support students with varying levels of instructional need. How SETs fit into these systems of support is unclear. In her qualitative research leading to a doctoral dissertation Wyatt-Ross (2007) sought to clarify how special educators construct their roles within a response to intervention model (a multi-tiered framework).

The research questions posed in this study asked: (a) “What is the role of the special education teacher in the school community” (p. 19) within the Rtl model; and (b) “What influenced the construction of this role” (p.19). The study' derived epistemologically from constructionism, using interpretivism as a theoretical lens from which to view the teachers' role construction. Wyatt-Ross notes two assumptions upon which the research is founded; (a) meaning is formulated by interpretations of the world that are situated historically, constructed over time through interactions in specific social settings; and (b) people make meaning of their worlds through experience within their contexts and by testing the acceptability of possible explanations.

Four elementary SETs and one special education administrator participated in the study. All but one teacher had over 20 years of experience. The suburban school district served 5713 students: 60% from minority groups, 40 % qualified for FRL, and

14.6 % had IEPs. The district was implementing a tiered system of supports, identified as response to intervention. One teacher taught in a school in the first phase (year 1 or 2) of implementation, the others worked in schools in phase two. The special educators served students with mild to moderate disabilities and co-taught in general education classrooms.

Each SET participated in two individual semi-structured interviews, each lasting 20-30 minutes. The first interview gleaned background information, career choices and experiences, and how those factors influenced teachers' pedagogies. The second interview gathered more detailed information about the participant's role and role construction at that time. Interviews were completed during the summer and early fall months. The one administrator interview included questions regarding her view of special education for the district and the role of the special education teacher in schools. Constant comparative analysis was used with verbatim transcripts of the audio-taped interviews. Hatch's (2002) eight steps of interpretive analysis were adhered to, beginning with readings of data to get a sense of the complete meaning. This was followed by multiple rereads of the interview data and researcher journals, and writing memos to capture impressions, record themes, and make interpretations. The researcher completed two member checks with each participant to ensure accuracy of data and interpretations.

In this effort to clarify roles of special educators in elementary schools implementing RtI Wyatt-Ross discovered what she termed role ambiguity. These experienced special educators not only were unclear as to what role they should play within the context of multi-tiered systems of support, three of the SETs did not

understand what RtI was or its connection to student achievement. Further, these SETs made no distinction between inclusion and co-teaching. The district policy mandated co-teaching as the model for inclusion with pull out resource used solely to provide intensive interventions for students not meeting progress goals. The SETs had no clear understanding of the relationship among the RtI framework for supporting students with various needs, inclusion as a belief system, and co-teaching as one delivery mechanism within the overall system of supports and services. It is unsurprising that the SETs experienced role ambiguity with so little understanding of the system.

The special educators identified their roles in terms of tasks they performed: progress monitoring, facilitating small group instruction, writing IEPs, participating in building level teams making curricular and behavioral interventions, and monitoring building level legal compliance in special education issues. The participant administrator saw the teacher's role as collaborator with general education faculty and facilitator for students' access to the general education curriculum. She also noted the SETs would provide instruction to general education students at risk for academic failure. The SETs provided this intervention, but expressed concern about the legality of doing so.

This study revealed that co-teaching was an often uncomfortable way of working. These SETs felt marginalized as though they were considered lesser professionals than the general education teachers they worked with. The one teach, one assist approach to co-teaching was reported as used in all of these cases and the special educator was the assistant. Special educators felt awkward as unwelcome visitors in the general educators' classrooms. Wyatt-Ross (2007) pointed out the difficulty of SETs paving the

way for inclusive interactions for their students with special education needs when the SETs themselves were marginalized. She also suggested an interesting possibility by linking the underutilization of SETs in co-taught classrooms to the lack of adequate co-planning by the teaching teams. Although some time was scheduled for co-planning it was not believed to be long enough or frequent enough to allow for instructional planning that could result in a fully realized team effort.

This study pointed out several important issues, yet there were some concerns about the study itself. The researcher's initial description of interpretivism as a theoretical perspective was unclear and how that perspective related to her findings was not delineated. The RtI framework within the schools and its relationship to the SETs' roles and functions was not made explicit. Only with careful study could the reader discern that the four participant SETs utilized both co-teaching and resource models of service delivery. Finally the researcher seemed to equate teacher effectiveness with teacher satisfaction, yet these two characteristics are not equal. Effectiveness deals with a teacher's ability to influence outcomes. Satisfaction is a state of being contented. This study did not set out to address teacher effectiveness and this does provide a provocative conundrum. The SETs reported being very satisfied with their careers, but related many instances of disenfranchisement. The focus of the interview questions was not on job satisfaction and the interviews were relatively short, thus this quandary is unlikely to be resolved. More extensive investigation might have provided greater clarity regarding how special educators reconciled their marginalizing experiences, and how they spent their time on the tasks they performed.

## Teachers' Use of Time

Vannest and Hagan-Burke (2010) sought to identify what SETs spend their time doing and whether there were differences in time use across various service delivery models. The researchers tested a procedure to capture information about teacher time use in order to determine whether teachers could reliably report their time use given a web-based monitoring system. Time use data was then used to provide a picture of the SETs' tasks. This exploratory study was conducted in two school districts in central Texas, with similar percentages of students in special education, near 8.6%.

Thirty-six full time elementary, middle, and high school SETs working in 4 instructional arrangements (9 adaptive behavior/self-contained, 14 resource, 7 content mastery/consultant, 6 co-teach) participated in the study. All were certified in special education and taught students with high incidence disabilities. Years of teaching experience ranged from 0 to 17 years, with 15 SETs having less than 5 years of experience, and 13 with 5 to 10 years of experience.

The investigators had previously developed and piloted the Teacher Time Use Instrument (Vannest, Adiguzel, & Hagan-Burke, 2005) to quantify the activities teachers participated in throughout a school day. Twelve activity codes on the instrument represented teacher behavior. Teachers were trained on the definitions of the activity codes, how to determine their time use for codes, and how to use the electronic data collection tools. Data collection occurred in the spring semester, captured typical instructional days, and represented each day of the school week in roughly equal numbers. A total of 2,200 hours were recorded representing 31 days spread over 8 weeks. Time was reported in percentages of an hour as averaged across an instructional day. Teachers were able to reliably document their time use.

Teachers' tasks were categorized into 12 activity codes: academic instruction was time spent teaching academic skills toward meeting state standards; nonacademic instruction was teaching in areas not addressed in standards such as social skills and classroom procedures; instructional support was supporting students, but not providing instruction; discipline; supervision; assessment; individualized educational plan indicated time spent in meetings specifically to address IEPs; paperwork included that required for IEPs as well as any other required by school, district, state, or federal government; consultation and collaboration; other responsibilities; plan and prepare; and personal time.

Analysis of data indicated that overall SETs spent approximately 16% of the day in academic instruction, 15% of the day in instructional support, and 12% of the day in paperwork. For some SETs paperwork seemed to account for nearly 50% of their time. In the middle range of time use were consulting and collaborating (8%), discipline (7%), supervision (7%), personal time (9%), and other responsibilities (8%). Low time use activities include planning (5%), IEP meetings (2%), assessment (4%), and nonacademic instruction (4%).

Time use was then compared across instructional settings. Resource room SETs spent an estimated 17.2% of their time on academic instruction, 12.9% of time on paperwork, and 11.0 % of time on instructional support. Content mastery SETs spent 16.5% of time in academic instruction, 16.2% of time in instructional support, and 13.9 % on paperwork. Co-teachers spent 19.2% time on instructional support, 14.8 % of time on academic instruction, and 11.3 % on paperwork. Teachers in adaptive behavior self-contained settings spent 16.5% of time on instructional support, 12.5% of time on

academic instruction, and 11.8 % of time on discipline. The difference in the amount of time spent on discipline by SETs in adaptive behavior classrooms was statistically significant in comparison to the other three settings. Time spent in instructional support varied a great deal among co-teaching settings.

Statistically significant differences in time use by activity by setting could be seen. Resource SETs spent more time than all others in academic and non academic instruction; and more time on instructional support than co-teachers or adaptive behavior teachers. Content mastery teachers spent more time than co-teachers or adaptive behavior teachers on instructional support and more time than any others on paperwork or personal time. Co-teachers recorded spending more time in consultation than those in all other settings, and more time in supervision than content mastery SETs or resource SETs. SETs in adaptive behavior classrooms spent more time on supervision, discipline, and planning than did SETs in any other setting.

No single activity took up the majority of the day. To look at these data from another viewpoint Vannest and Hagan-Burke (2010) combined activities into constructs. Academic instruction, non academic instruction, and instructional support could be considered teaching activities, which add up to 40% of time used, still less than half of a teacher's day. To consider duties particular to special education work, paperwork, IEP meetings, and consulting and collaborating were combined, and accounted for 23 % of the day. The vast number of activities that SETs are responsible for may pose a challenge to providing effective instruction.

A few concerns arise when one looks at how SETs use time. When compared to only 16% of teacher time spent on academic instruction, spending 12 % of the work day

on paperwork seems extreme. The small amount of time (5%) spent in planning for instruction is troublesome. Policy dictates that SETs engage students in content area instruction and multi-tiered systems require differentiation in instruction. Lack of time spent planning for that instruction is likely to hinder the quality of the instructional performance. In adaptive behavior classes only 3.3% time was spent on non-academic instruction such as social skills. Little time was spent on this in other models as well, but it seems it should be an important part of the curriculum for students with emotional and behavior disorders and other adaptive behavior issues. Some questions that arise from this study include: How intentional is SETs' use of time? What value is placed on teacher activities? What is desirable for SETs to be doing and should that vary by setting? Should use of time be part of the evaluation of SETs?

### **Special Education Teacher Leadership**

York-Barr, Sommerness, Duke, and Ghere (2005) utilized a focus group methodology to investigate the work done by SETs serving students with low incidence disabilities within inclusive schools and to identify supports for their practice. Eight elementary and secondary school teachers, six of whom were site based direct service providers and two of whom were lead teachers that supported direct service teachers across schools, participated in two full day focus group meetings scheduled two weeks apart. These SETs represented two large urban districts and one medium-sized school district. All selected participants were viewed by administrators and parents as highly effective educators. These teachers served students with low incidence disabilities who were included in general education classrooms throughout most of the school day, and had some level of support from paraprofessionals. None of the teachers served

students whose primary disability was learning disabilities or emotional/behavioral disabilities.

Five focused questions were addressed, with participants given the opportunity for individual reflection and written response before interacting with one another in structured groups. The four sources of data collected were: the participants' individual response records; key conversation points recorded on poster paper; notes made by the observers (two of the researchers); and notes from project team meetings post focus group meetings. Once all data were collected and organized each project team member individually provided analysis. The whole team then met to compare and contrast analyses. Focus group participants were contacted when necessary to clarify interpretations, and were provided a preliminary report of findings to provide feedback. All participants indicated agreement with the report of findings.

A comprehensive listing of responsibilities was developed from the data. York-Barr et al. (2005) presented eight major findings. The first revealed that the roles of special educators were extremely complex with numerous, varying, and overlapping responsibilities. The work was presented as four roles: developing programs for individual students; coordinating program implementation; designing and providing instruction; and managing the work of paraprofessionals. As program coordinator, SETs were seen as the link between the students and the complex array of human and physical resources available to them. A second major finding indicated that special educators' daily activity was ever changing. SETs reported spending the majority of their time on direct instruction, communicating with other faculty and paraprofessionals, and preparing materials and instruction. A range of other activities filled out the day.

Unexpected interruptions to the scheduled day, such as staff absences or schedule changes, took up time and energy.

The third major finding pointed out the cyclical nature of the SETs' work. Annually there were certain times around which activities and responsibilities clustered, such as the beginning and end of the school year. At these times the special educators reported an inability to provide the necessary instructional time for students. The fourth major finding suggested that having a vision for the collaborative work needed in inclusive schools and maintaining the relationships necessary to communicate that vision were the foundation for effective practice. The SETs were likened to bridge-builders, connecting people and resources.

The fifth major finding was the high levels of competence needed for special educators. Instruction, communication, and management were all domains in which expertise was necessary. Sixth, understanding and support from site and district level administration was deemed crucial to the success of inclusive schools and to the satisfaction of teachers with their jobs. The more supportive of inclusion the administrators were, the more empowered and confident the teachers were in fulfilling their responsibilities. The seventh finding pointed to the importance of collaborative relationships, both formal and informal, among staff. It was deemed helpful to have a team of special educators with whom one could problem solve. Also important were collaborations with general educators. The eighth major finding dealt with the importance of administration providing formal supports, such as scheduled time for collaboration and planning or clerical staff to schedule meetings and do paperwork, that would allow for the most effective and efficient use of the teachers' expertise.

York-Barr et al. (2005) recognized teacher leadership characteristics within the complex, multi-dimensional roles of the special educator participants in this study. The special educators as case managers operated between multiple levels of practice, identified by York-Barr et al. as the student level, the team/collegiate level, and the organizational level. Management skills were reported by the teachers when they described how the work they did with colleagues and administrative personnel influenced opportunities for their students. Understanding the organization of the school/district and communicating vision were activities these teachers reported, which are often associated with leadership.

### **Synthesis of Studies**

Each of the studies chosen for inclusion in this section of the review investigated the role of SETs using a different lens and methodology. Youngs et al. (2011) used a mixed methodology, qualitative interviews and surveys, to investigate the differences between how early career SETs and general educators understood and negotiated their roles. The Klingner and Vaughn (2002) case study looked at the evolution of the role from one expert SET's point of view as the school underwent a major shift in the way services were provided to students with disabilities (inclusion). York-Barr et al. (2005) used focus groups to examine the role by identifying duties and responsibilities of SETs. Vannest and Hagan-Burke (2010) built a data collection instrument for use in an observational study documenting the time SETs spent on activities within their instructional day, using statistical methods to quantify teachers' time use. Wyatt-Ross (2007) used semi-structured interviews to examine how SETs understood their roles as their schools underwent another school reform, the implementation of a multi-tiered framework of supports. All of these studies identify the complexity of the role of the

SET, underscore that it is a role different from that of a GET, and point out the importance of the school context when one is attempting to understand the role. These studies allude to the prioritizing and decision making that special educators experience when navigating their roles.

Although the focus group members in the York-Barr et al. (2005) study worked with a population of students with low incidence disabilities, which is different from the participants in the other included studies, the investigation revealed similar roles and responsibilities and similar time use. Instructional activities and collaborative activities tended to take up most of the SETs' time during the day. The importance of building and maintaining relationships for collaborations was repeated. York-Barr et al pointed out the informal, horizontal leadership performed by special educators, an idea that was alluded to by Klingner and Vaughn (2002) in their presentation of Joyce as an expert inclusion specialist. The need for SETs to be flexible and adaptable because of ever changing, complex expectations and responsibilities was noted by all of the researchers. The number and variety of tasks for which special educators are responsible was described in each of these studies. The complexity of the SETs role appeared to increase along with the proliferation of inclusion in general education classrooms (York-Barr et al.)

A theme that emerged from these studies was social relevance of the special educator's role enactment as it related to opportunities for the students. Wyatt-Ross (2007) presented a picture of marginalization and disenfranchisement in the stories of special educators as co-teachers, voicing concern that this marginalization of SETs would affect the acceptance of students. Youngs et al. (2011) showed the novice

special educators as asked to do more with less than the novice general educators, another manifestation of marginalization. The special educators York-Barr et al. (2005) interviewed expressed an awareness that only through their connectedness within their systems would their students be afforded an equitable experience. Klingner and Vaughn (2002) pointed out the importance of Joyce's interpersonal skills in her students' successful integration into general education classes. The better connected, more savvy, more socially capitalized the teacher was the more opportunities she could establish for her students.

Vannest and Hagan-Burke (2011) reported that SETs recorded less than half of the workday engaged in academic instructional activities. Observational studies by Cornett (2010) and Swanson (2008) also reported teachers' engaged in small amounts of instructional time. The four other studies analyzed in this review did not track time use, but did point out myriad duties that would interfere with instructional time. This raises the question of whether the performance of other duties makes it unreasonable to expect students to progress adequately due to insufficient instructional time. Consequently, it may be valuable to identify how SETs prioritize their duties.

The current case study extends previous work by examining SETs' roles at a time when reform efforts include the use of school wide multi-tiered frameworks to support students both in general education and special education programs. It also addresses SETs' intentions to enact their roles.

In their discussion of the history of special education noted in this chapter, Brownell and colleagues (2010) remarked that problem solving and decision making are skills needed by special educators, and that there has come recognition that teachers'

beliefs have an impact on their classroom activities. Cook and Cook (2004) observed that teaching is a profession in which numerous decisions must be made quickly, instinctually, and are often based upon knowledge acquired through the teacher's experience or that of other teachers. What are the beliefs and experiences, and who are the people that influence SETs' decisions about how to carry out their roles in schools? The present study was guided by the theory of planned behavior to explore SETs' explanation of elements they attend to that influence their decisions about how to enact their roles.

### **Theory of Planned Behavior**

The theory of planned behavior has been used to explain and predict behavior in specific contexts. Ajzen (1991) identified three constructs that combine to make up a person's intent toward and execution of particular actions. The first of these factors is the person's attitude about the behavior, shaped by their beliefs about the positive or negative consequences of carrying out the activity. The second factor is the subjective norm which is the person's sensitivity to social pressure regarding the performance of the behavior. The third factor is the person's perceived behavioral control, beliefs about having the necessary opportunities and resources and actual ability to execute the behavior. In any given situation, the relative weight of the three constructs, attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, is likely to vary (Ajzen, 1991). The first two of these factors, attitudes about the behavior and subjective norms, lead to a person's intention to perform or not perform a behavior. Intention combined with perceived behavioral control influence whether the individual pursues performance of the behavior. Time lapse between when intent is identified and when the behavior is to occur may influence whether the behavior is carried out. For instance, new information

may shift the beliefs underlying intent or a person may find it easier to continue with familiar routines (Ajzen, 1985).

The predictive value of the TPB on behavior has been supported in studies reviewed by Ajzen (1991) and by Armitage and Conner (2001). Armitage and Conner related that several earlier research reviews and meta-analyses had provided support for use of the TPB in predicting a wide variety of behaviors and behavioral intentions. Armitage and Conner performed a meta-analytic review that included 185 independent empirical tests of the TPB. Across those studies the TPB accounted for 27% of the variance in behavior and 39% of the variance in intention. Significant amounts of variance in both intention and behavior were accounted for by perceived behavioral control.

Numerous studies of health related behavior, leisure choice, workplace behavior, and conservation practices have applied the TPB. Educational research to explain African American students' decisions to complete high school, teachers' decisions to use technology PE teachers' beliefs about teaching students with disabilities, why teachers leave the profession, and teachers' motivation to motivate students have also utilized TPB.

The theory of planned behavior will be used in this study to understand how SETs comprehend and enact their roles. The exploration of teachers' attitudes about their role will be accomplished by asking participant teachers their beliefs about special education teaching and what the role should or could be. To uncover the special educators' normative beliefs, which underlie the subjective norm, questions will address how others, whose opinions are important to the teacher, would expect that teacher to

perform their professional role. To get at perceived behavioral control the teachers will be asked about the alignment of external and internal resources that would allow them to carry out the role of special education teacher the way they believe it should be implemented.

Figure 2-4 represents an adapted model of Ajzen's theory of planned behavior as it pertains to the role of SETs for this proposed study. Figure 2-4 illustrates the relationships between beliefs and constructs: Behavioral beliefs lead to the construct of attitude toward a behavior, normative beliefs underlie the subjective norm, and control beliefs guide perceived behavioral control. The figure also illustrates how the three constructs form intention to carry out a behavior. The diagram takes into consideration the influence of actual behavioral control on the performance of the behavior. A more detailed description of how this theory will be used to frame the interview protocols and analyze data will be provided in Chapter 3.

The policy and research literature reviewed in this chapter indicate that ambiguity surrounds the role of the special education teacher in contemporary elementary schools, where multi-tiered systems of supports have emerged as a prevalent organizational structure. This ambiguity raises the question of whether it is appropriate to consider the special educator as having a role in a school, or if the reality is that the individual performs a multitude of roles and these need clarification. The studies revealed that negotiating the role(s) of a special educator is a complex undertaking. The theory of planned behavior was selected to aid in gaining further understanding about how a special education teacher chooses to enact the role. Chapter three describes the research methods used in looking into special education teachers' roles.

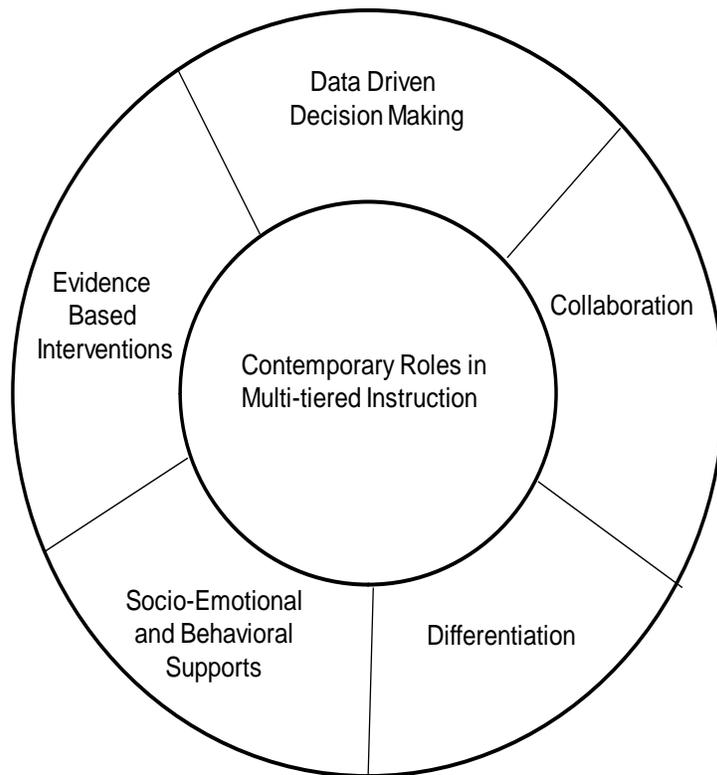


Figure 2-1. Five contemporary role areas for special educators in multilevel instruction. From "The Role of Special Educators in a Multitiered Instructional System" By J. Hoover and J.B. Patton, 2008, *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 43, p.199. Copyright 2008 by Hammill Institute on Disabilities. Reprinted with permission.

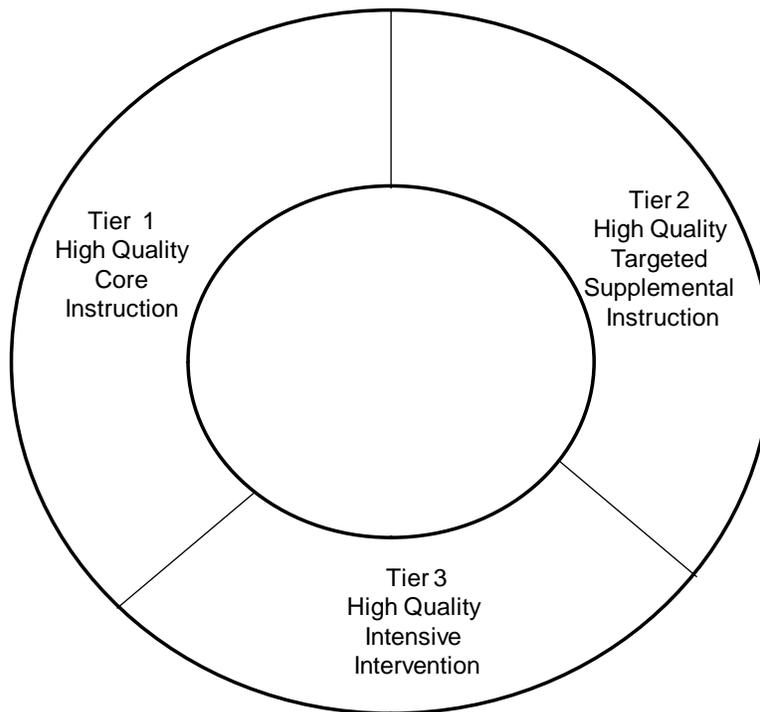


Figure 2-2. Three instructional levels within multi-tiered instructional programming for all learners. From “The Role of Special Educators in a Multitiered Instructional System” By J. Hoover and J.B. Patton, 2008, *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 43, p.197. Copyright 2008 by Hammill Institute on Disabilities. Reprinted with permission.

**ACADEMIC and BEHAVIOR SYSTEMS**

**Tier 3: Intensive, Individualized Interventions & Supports.**

**Tier 2: Targeted, Supplemental Interventions & Supports**

**Tier 1: Core, Universal Instruction & Supports.**

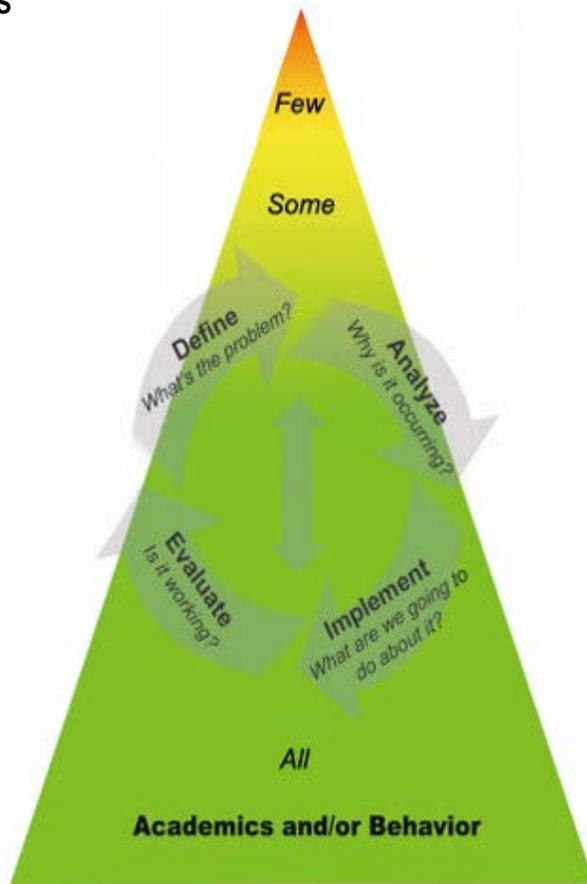


Figure 2-3. Florida' Response to Instruction/Intervention Model retrieved 11/24/11 from <http://www.florida-rti.org/fIMod/threeTierModel.htm>

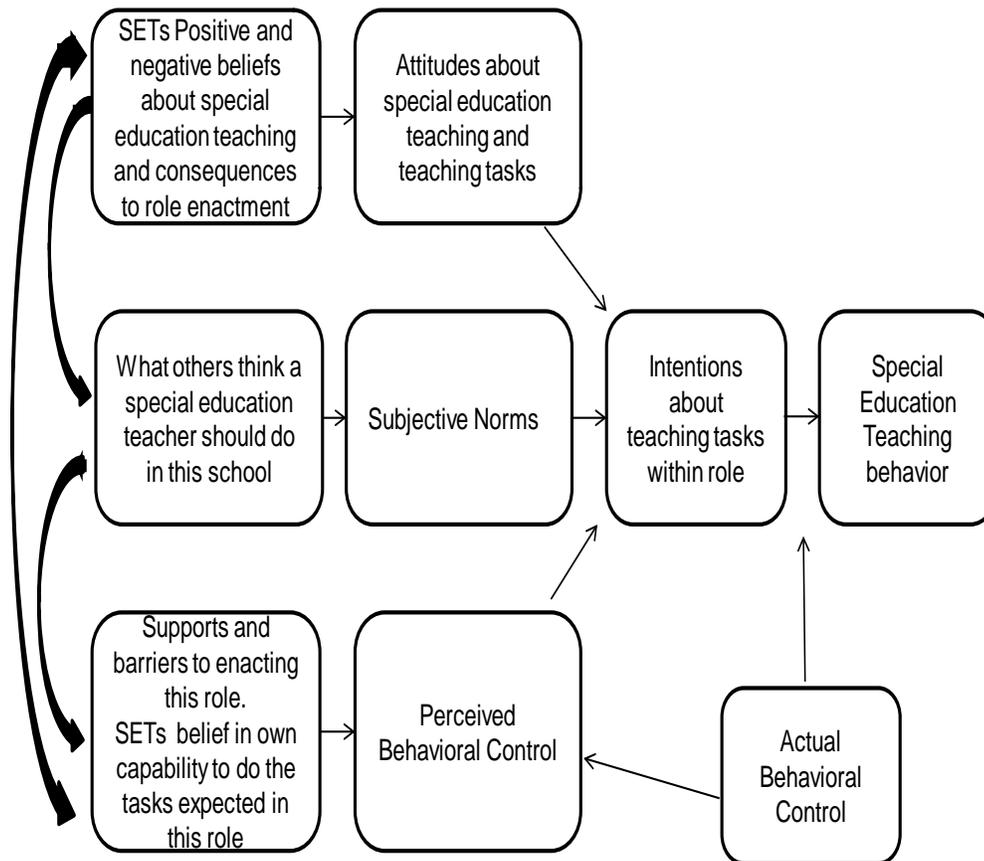


Figure 2-4. Diagram of the Theory of Planned Behavior as related to special education teaching. Adapted from the Theory of Planned Behavior by I. Ajzen, 2006, Retrieved May, 2011 from <http://people.umass.edu/ajzen/contact.html> Copyright 2006 by Ajzen. Reprinted with permission.

## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to examine how special education teachers negotiate their roles within contemporary elementary schools, many of which have implemented multi-tiered systems of support for students. The proliferation of inclusive classrooms has an impact on the complexity of the job of the special education teacher. In writing about instructional contexts McDonnell (2011) suggests among the outcomes of moving instruction from self-contained classes to general education classes “is that the role of special educators must shift from providing instruction to students to designing educational programs and supports so that other individuals can provide effective instruction to students” (p. 535). Exploration of the SET’s work is needed to understand teachers’ thinking and decision making regarding services provided to students with disabilities (Billingsley, 2011). Qualitative research methods were used in the present study because they offered the opportunity to look deeply into how individuals interpret and ascribe meaning to their worlds and experiences (Merriam, 2009).

### **Assumptions and Rationale for a Qualitative Design**

Qualitative research may be used in special education to “explore attitudes, opinions and beliefs...and examine personal reactions to special education contexts and teachings strategies” (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p. 195). National policy decisions are being argued regarding the direction of school reform, special education teaching, and the training of special education teachers (Billingsley, 2011; Brownell et al, 2010; Deshler & Cornett, in press; Fuchs, Fuchs & Stecker, 2010). In the midst of this discussion there is a need for the voice of the teacher to be heard and the actions of the teacher to be seen. A qualitative design

utilizing interviews and observations will provide opportunities for insights into special education teachers' thoughts and actions within their work contexts.

The present investigation used a multisite case study design. "Case study research is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (Merriam, 2009, p.40). A "bounded system" is a unit of study that could be a person, program, institution or group and is defined within specific limits, or boundaries (Merriam). For this investigation the case is comprised of SETs, identified by administrators as being successful in their positions in elementary schools in one Florida school system. Studying SETs within one school system limits contextual variables by providing policy and procedural similarities across schools. Obtaining data from SETs at more than one school site offers opportunities for analysis within and across contexts. The context of the SETs' work is integral to understanding the role the teacher assumes. Case study research honors the importance of context in experience.

Qualitative research also influences the researcher's role. The role of the researcher in qualitative inquiry is that of the primary data collection and analysis instrument (Merriam, 2009). The researcher interviews, observes, gathers documents, processes and interprets data. As the researcher I was mindful that interviewing requires sensitivity and respectful listening. Analysis required me to be reflexive, aware of my connections to, influence on, and biases regarding the topic, data, context, and participants (Hatch, 2002). I was attentive to presenting research findings with honesty and integrity and representing the case in such a way as to help readers construct their knowledge of the case (Stake, 2005).

## **Procedures**

In case study research purposeful sampling allows the researcher to select information-rich cases projected to yield great stores of information about the topic at hand (Merriam, 2009). The cases in this study share common elements and the participants are typical of the case.

### **The Setting**

The study was conducted in one school district in the Southeastern United States. Confining the study to one district can limit confounding differences in curriculum, procedures, practices, and terminology (Byrnes, 2008). A major research university is located within the district and wields economic, educational, and cultural influence in the community. The district was selected due to its convenient location allowing for face-to-face interviews and observations, and its use of multi-tiered systems of support in most elementary schools. This medium sized public school district enrolled approximately 27,500 students pre-kindergarten through grade 12 in Fall, 2010 (FLDOE, 2011d). Nearly half (48.88%) of students enrolled in the district were eligible for free or reduced priced lunches (FRL). There were approximately 13,200 students enrolled in prekindergarten through grade 5, and elementary school enrollments ranged from more than 800 to fewer than 200 students (FLDOE, 2011d). Twenty-one of the district's 23 elementary schools received Title 1 funds (FLDOE, 2010-2011). Nineteen of those were schoolwide (40% or more students eligible for FRL) Title 1 programs. Two suburban schools with 35% - 40% FRL had targeted assistance Title 1 programs.

The district is comprised of urban, suburban, and rural communities. Four of the five elementary schools with over 90% FRL were urban schools and one was a rural school. All five were located in a particular geographic area of the district that has

experienced little economic growth in the past several decades. Federal, state and district policies have moved elementary schools toward use of multi-tiered systems of supports for students. In Florida and this district, the term MTSS encompasses three tiered systems that have been implemented: 1) the Florida Continuous Improvement Model (FCIM) to address academics; 2) Positive Behavior Supports (PBS) to address behavior; 3) Response to Intervention (RtI) used to monitor progress and determine eligibility for some special education categories. All schools address plans for RtI implementation in their annual School Improvement Plans (SIP).

Sixteen percent of the students enrolled in the district received special education services (FLDOE, 2011c). The district employs a continuum of placements and services, and most of its students with disabilities are included in general education classes for some portion of their school day. For example, 83% of students in special education spent more than 40% of their instructional day in general education classes; 66% of these students were included in general education classrooms for 80% or more of their school day, and 17% of these students were included for 40% to 79% of their school day (FLDOE, 2011c).

Enrollment data for the 2010-2011 school year was available for the three schools involved in the study and is illustrated in Table 3.1. Enrollment ranged from 459 to 645 students. The three schools had similar percentages of students eligible for FRL, near 53%. Two schools, Milton and Thomas Paine, had special education enrollments near 15% and Harding's was 8.5% of the total school population. Fewer than 2% of students were identified as English Language Learners (ELL) at Milton and Thomas Paine

Elementary Schools. At Harding Elementary School, a center school for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), nearly 23% of students were ELLs.

### **The Participants**

Elementary schools in this district typically employ one or more special education teachers. Because the vast majority of students with disabilities in this district spend substantial amounts of time in general education classes, SETs were recruited whose teaching responsibilities included students for whom 40% or more of their day took place in general education classes. I asked district special education and literacy personnel that had knowledge of SETs and their practice, as well as elementary school administrators, to nominate SETs who worked in co-teach or resource settings. I specified that I was looking for SETs who were highly regarded, experienced, employed full time, and certified as special educators. Highly regarded SETs were further characterized as providing effective instruction as measured in some part by student academic success, adept in addressing disability related student needs, and skilled in communicating and collaborating with colleagues. I ruled out teachers working in schools where I was assigned in order to avoid a conflict of interest. After receiving a list of possible candidates and the schools in which they taught, district protocol required gaining approval from the principals at these schools. Teachers at the schools of the first three principals who submitted research approvals to the district became the three participants in the study. Each of the three participants was nominated by two or more individuals.

The three participants were female, Caucasian, had over 25 years teaching experience each, had majored in special education in college, and were dually certified. Their average age was 52 years. All three had taught special education throughout

their careers and the years of teaching at their current schools ranged from 7 to 20 years. Descriptive data for the participants is presented in Table 3.2.

### **Assurance of Confidentiality**

The names of research participants and schools were kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms and codes on written and electronic reports, data management systems, and transcripts of interviews. Documentary evidence had names removed and replaced with pseudonyms or codes. Descriptions used in reporting were written in such a way as to guard the identities of individuals and schools.

### **Issues of Entry, Ethics and Subjectivity**

**Entry.** To conduct qualitative research in a school district I submitted a request through the university institutional review board (IRB). Once approval was granted from the university IRB, I contacted the school district research department. The research office directed me to the special education department to obtain their support. The special education department assisted with obtaining nominations of exemplary special education teachers. District policy required that school principals at selected sites signify approval prior to the district granting approval to the research application. I contacted principals in schools of nominated SETs by phone to explain the nature of the research and ask that they respond to the research request that would follow. After approval to proceed was established I contacted nominated SETs through phone calls and email to set up initial meetings. The purpose for the research, expectations for time, risks and benefits to the participant and confidentiality were explained to potential participants. Participant contact information was gathered (Appendix A). Written informed consent (Appendix B) was obtained before interviews proceeded. Interviews occurred at places of convenience and comfort for the participants.

**Ethics.** Ethical considerations in qualitative research include such things as explaining the purpose of the study, statements regarding risk, and assurances of confidentiality (Merriam; 2009) that were addressed as part of obtaining informed consent. Another consideration was reciprocity (Merriam, Seidman, 2006), meaning what the parties stand to gain from participating in the inquiry. I, as the researcher, stand to gain by earning a doctoral degree and perhaps publishing my work. The participant SETs made themselves vulnerable by allowing me to interview them about their lives and work. Some may have gained by appreciating the opportunity to tell their stories and the opportunity to reflect on their practice. I reviewed audiotapes and transcripts of interviews prior to subsequent interviews to refer back to previous statements and ask for clarifications. I shared an initial draft of their profile with each participant after completing the interviews to obtain their reactions and feedback. Each of the SETs indicated satisfaction that I had reflected their perceptions in the profiles and made no suggestions for change. I recognize that I asked participants to commit a substantial amount of time to the interviews and observations and offered a token of thanks in the form of a gift card to a department store.

**Subjectivity.** The researcher is integral to qualitative data collection and analysis, and this intimacy with the data requires self-reflection to uncover and acknowledge possible biases and stances that may influence interpretation (Merriam, 2009). The following statement regarding my own subjectivity may be longer than is typical, but the history it provides is central to my personal understanding of the special educator's role, provides insight into my sensitivities, and acknowledges how my own history intersected with these participants.

My career as an educator spans much of the modern history of special education. I was in high school volunteering at a private school that was the only educational option for students with disabilities when the Education for all Handicapped Students Act, PL 94-142 was passed. In the late 1970s and early 1980s I earned my bachelors degree at one of a handful of colleges that offered a dual major in special education and general education. Along with liberal arts classes I attended content area methods classes with future general elementary education teachers. Courses in special education included assessment, observation, choosing and modifying materials to meet individual student needs, designing interventions, and monitoring progress using single-subject design. There were semester long classes designed around categories of disabilities, for instance specific learning disabilities. Field experiences began in the first semester of my freshman year and continued each semester through the four and a half year program culminating in two nine week student teaching experiences, one in a general education second grade classroom, and one in a self contained, varying exceptionalities classroom serving students across elementary grade levels.

As with too many special educators, I left teaching after three years. Despite strong college preparation, I was not prepared to teach successfully in the middle school cultures I experienced. I attribute this to a clash between my beliefs about what individual students needed and the school administrators' understanding of how to manage special education within the school context, combined with my own youthful arrogance. My employment over the next decade consisted of disabilities-related work in various venues including state agencies, a public school special education district

office, and an outreach program for families of infants and preschool age children with disabilities. I became better informed about policy and organizational management, more sensitive to the needs of children and their families, and more politic in my dealings with other professionals. I was ready to re-enter the realm of public school teaching.

In 1993 I began working at a rural elementary school as a substitute guidance counselor. This position served as the gateway to special education in the school system enabling me to rapidly learn local procedures. It ultimately led to teaching in a self-contained, varying exceptionalities classroom, and later a resource classroom at this school. As a teacher of a self-contained special education class, my day had many parallels to that of general education teachers. I taught all content areas to my own students in my own classroom. I was told by one principal that mine was the most academically focused self-contained classroom he had ever seen. I had a planning period when my students went to special area classes such as art and music. There were distinctions from my general education colleagues, though; I was responsible for developing and implementing IEPs, which meant facilitating many meetings; and I sat with my students during the breakfast and lunch periods to manage their behavior in the cafeteria.

As a resource teacher I was frequently pulled from the classroom for IEP meetings, during what should have been instructional time. Instruction was primarily in mathematics and reading. Rather than spend lunch monitoring student behavior in the cafeteria, I added a content area instructional period to attempt to reach more students. I had no scheduled planning period because I taught students at every grade level.

Before and after school planning time was spent in IEP preparation and meetings, on the fly consults with general education teachers, and faculty and team meetings. I co-taught part of the day in a general education classroom for one year, and experienced many of the challenges to planning and sharing instructional space noted in the literature. In both positions I supervised paraprofessionals who worked with me in the classroom and accompanied students to special area classes. As the special education team leader I was responsible for assuring that all school wide procedural requirements were met and documentation was accurate. Finally frustrated with feeling that I could not do enough, despite putting in longer days than most of my general education colleagues, I requested a move to a general education classroom. As a special educator I advocated for inclusion of my students in as many areas of the school experience as the climate would allow. I marketed my move to general education by telling the principal mine would be an inclusive general education classroom.

As a general education teacher I experienced students with special education needs from the viewpoint of a teacher responsible for the whole group. The numbers of students with disabilities placed in my class varied from year to year, and the amount of support those students received from the special education teachers varied as well. One year I was the general education teacher in a co-teaching partnership for reading instruction. It was during these years as a general educator that NCLB 2001 and IDEA 2004 were reauthorized and the shift in focus to academic standards, accountability, and access to general education curriculum drove public schooling. My school participated in the professional development, progress monitoring, and coaching provided by the Reading First initiative.

I was part of the leadership team that steered the school into broader inclusion of students with special education needs into general education classrooms, and into implementation of a multi-tiered system of supports for all students. I believed that more of our students with disabilities could benefit from additional support in the general education classroom and that too many general educators had been relieved of their responsibility to these students. The school never realized a fully inclusive program, but efforts were made to utilize both co-teaching and resource configurations. I was aware as well that many general educators recognized that there were students, both with and without identified disabilities, who needed more specialized instruction than they received in the general education classrooms. These teachers welcomed the tiered intervention systems, as did I. I felt that multi-tiered systems of support: FCIM, RtI, and PBS, had the potential to change schools and change lives. In my opinion, these policy driven innovations were most successful in years when the local school had the most flexibility as to how to utilize resources, and when the administration was solidly supportive.

My experiences as an educator, both in special education and in general education, ignited my pursuit of studying how special educators understand, explain, and enact their roles within the context of multi-tiered programming. The breadth of my experience helped me to be aware of nuances in the work of special educators and helped me look at the data from multiple viewpoints. Throughout the study, the sensitivities gleaned from my past were compared to the current realities of special education teaching. It was imperative that I journaled my reactions to encounters throughout data collection to explore biases that emerged and to provide a fair analysis

(Hatch, 2002). A bias that I considered as I analyzed the data was my concern that teachers are asked to do too much. I worked for a number of years in an elementary school in the district studied and because of continuing close relationships with staff there, I chose not to select participants from that school.

I knew I had acquaintance with two of the three selected participants right from the start, having been a teacher in this district for a number of years. Recently I had been introduced to Annie at national CEC convention by school district and university personnel. I was aware of her work in inclusive schooling and the high esteem in which she was held by these colleagues.

Twenty-nine years ago Emma and I had both taught special education in another school district. Since then we had lost touch, but a few weeks before conducting this study we met at a professional meeting and enjoyed a friendly conversation. When her name came up repeatedly from district personnel as a possible candidate, initially I was anxious about interviewing her, but remembered the recent contact and asked her to participate. Both of us enjoyed the opportunity to reconnect and catch up, if briefly, on what had occurred in our lives over those many years.

I did not recognize Karen's name, since she had remarried, but in our initial telephone conversation she said she remembered me. I immediately remembered her on sight. She had worked in the district office when I was teaching special education so we met through district wide meetings and school site visits. She told me we also had another connection through family members with Down Syndrome.

I believe it is important that these personal connections be made visible because they are a part of the interaction between these participants and me. Their

acquaintance assisted me in gaining entry into their work lives. Knowing that they are held in high esteem by their colleagues at the district, school, and university levels and my personal regard for them, colors my perceptions. I hold high expectations for them and tend to see them favorably, so I was careful to be honest and thoughtful in my analyses. My former work as a special educator in schools similar to theirs, in the same district, aligns me with them in understanding their contexts. My current position affords me some familiarity with how information is disseminated within the district, and with the roles of staffing specialists, guidance counselors, and related services personnel within special education.

## **Data Collection Procedures**

### **Means of Collecting Data**

Data were collected through interviews with participant SETs, observations of the SETs as they went through their workday, document retrieval, and electronic communication.

### **In-Depth Interview Procedures and Protocols**

The primary method of data collection was in-depth interviews with three SETs, adhering to a three interview schedule. This study examines the experience of a particular set of SETs with the aim of understanding the how and why of the SETs' enactment of their roles within their school settings.

Each of the three interviews used semi-structured formats allowing some information to be asked of all participants, though most questions were open-ended in design with follow up questions stemming from, and meant to clarify and extend, the participants' responses (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). In some instances, additional contacts with

participants were necessary to follow up on new lines of thinking that developed from the initial interviews.

In the first interview the participants were asked to illuminate personal beliefs and attitudes about teaching special education. In the second interview participants were asked to give details of their school day. In the third interview participants were asked to reflect on their context and experiences, and express how they make sense of them. The interviews in this study were guided by Ajzen's (1985) Theory of Planned Behavior.

**Formulating the interview protocols.** The three components of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) were used in this study to inform the development of the three interview protocols. The questions were framed to access the participants' (a) attitudes toward special education teaching as a profession, (b) perceptions of influential others' about the role of special education teachers, and (c) beliefs about their control over enacting their role as a special education teacher in their current assignment.

The first interview involved the participants in relating beliefs about being SETs and what they see as their roles and responsibilities (Appendix C). The second interview addressed the day-to-day work of the SET: What are the specific duties these SETs carry out; how do they feel about their work; what are their expectations about the job; what they understand to be the social norms of their roles; what do they perceive as others' expectations about their work; why do they participate in certain tasks? Here the detail of participants' work was explored (Appendix D).

In the third interview participants were asked to make sense of the work that they do. They were asked to reflect on their contexts; opportunities and resources available to them, and the control they have over executing their roles. Questions in this

interview were also be framed by the TPB in an effort to probe the participants' beliefs about their current position; their capacity to do the tasks encountered on the job; and how much control they have over various aspects of their work (Appendix E).

**Testing the protocols.** Interview protocols for the teacher participants were piloted to gauge the validity of the questions and enhance their reliability. The three protocols for interviews with teacher participants were reviewed by an elementary SET who was not be a study participant. That teacher indicated that questions flowed logically, were understandable, and could be readily answered.

### **Observation Procedures**

Each SET was shadowed throughout one school day. For two of the SETs this occurred prior to interview 2. This allowed me to become acquainted with the participant's work context, observe the duties the SETs took part in, and better understand each participant as they discussed the details of their work. During the day's observation I noted teacher activities and my own impressions. This gave me an opportunity to question any misunderstandings I may have had, and to note any discrepancies between what was reported and what I saw occurring. Because of scheduling difficulties, the observation for one SET occurred after all three interviews had been completed. The present study did not set out to recreate a list of tasks or focus primarily on the time spent by the SETs in particular role related activities; however, I asked SETs to discuss how they feel when enacting various aspects of their roles and to describe any pressures they feel surrounding those duties. Tasks and responsibilities SETs discussed are listed in Appendix G.

## **Document Data Collection and Review**

Context is significant in the work of SETs (Billingsley, 2010; Gersten et al., 2001) and thorough description of context is essential to consumers of educational research seeking to determine the transferability of findings (Merriam, 2009). To find descriptors of each school I obtained the most recent available school report, school improvement plan, and assessment data; all of these are public records available from the school board website and state department of education website. Documentary evidence in the form of a written job description for special education teachers was collected from the district human resources website (Appendix A).

I asked participants to complete a log of activities for one or two days prior to the second interview. In this log SETs wrote activities that they participated in, how they felt about the task, any pressures they felt regarding the task, and how much control they felt they had over carrying out the activity. Two of the SETs completed the log, which was then discussed during interview 2. One participant felt that she did not have time during her day to complete the log, but gave a verbal account of her daily activities and her feelings regarding them at the second interview.

## **Data Analysis Procedures**

This section describes the procedures used in analyzing data. Qualitative data analysis consists of three distinct yet integrated elements, management of the data, analytic procedures, and reporting of the findings.

### **Data Management**

Because of the volume of data collected in case study research, it is particularly important to use a management system that will allow for ease of retrieval (Merriam, 2009). Each document collected was given an identifier coded to indicate the place

from which it was collected (district, school, teacher) and the date it was retrieved. Each participant and school was given a pseudonym. Interview transcripts were coded with identifiers, dates, interview number (1, 2, or 3 for each participant), and page. Field notes, observation forms, memos, and journal entries were dated, had time references, and the site identified. I transcribed all interviews using Express Scribe and Microsoft Word software. Handwritten notes and memos were kept in notebooks, a journal, and as margin notes on successive segments of typed text. Documentary information was kept in paper or computer files for organized storage and ease of retrieval for analysis.

### **Description of Analytic Techniques**

Taking an inductive approach to data analysis I used a constant comparative approach based on the format outlined by Maykut and Morehouse (1994). The first step of analysis was to “unitize” (p. 128) the data, identifying units of meaning through careful reading. In this discovery process as I read through documents, field notes and interview transcripts I wrote notes and comments regarding bits of data that recurred, seemed relevant, or captured my interest. These data points were revisited throughout the process of analysis. Units of meaning were either written on index cards for sorting, or were sorted using Microsoft Word. After identifying individual meaningful units in the data I looked for patterns and began to develop and name provisional categories. I compared each unit of meaning to others as I expanded my categories asking whether the meaning units looked or felt alike (Maykut & Morehouse), as though they belonged together in a category. Through this process initial membership in provisional categories was clarified, then rules for inclusion in categories were established to refine the categories. According to Merriam (2009) categories should be “responsive to the research question...sensitive to the data...exhaustive...mutually

exclusive...conceptually congruent” (p.186). Once data were categorized, I reviewed the categories to see if there was any overlap. Using the categories I looked for themes and patterns. A peer reviewer read through the transcripts to identify units of data she thought to be important. I then compared her comments to my analysis finding much that was consistent and making some revisions after reviewing contrasts.

There were particular areas of comparison and contrast across participants that I looked for including work contexts; work tasks; life histories; persons who influenced job related decisions; and policy or procedural understandings that influenced job activities. Each participant’s interviews were examined in reference to the TPB: for example, did participants’ responses indicate their attitudes about their activities as SETs, their beliefs about social expectations for special education teachers’ work, and their beliefs about their ability to perform their roles? I looked for themes that were striking in their uniqueness as well as those that were common to all participants. I looked for how the participants’ descriptions of their roles compare with the SETs’ role descriptions gathered from formal job descriptions. I also looked for patterns, themes, or interpretations that lay outside of the TPB. As each SET profile was nearing completion I requested peer review to consider the findings and their clarity.

### **Time Line**

Data collection took place between March, 2012, and June, 2012. Data analysis began with reading the first documents collected and was ongoing throughout and after the data collection process. Interviews were transcribed as quickly as possible. Some were completed prior to follow up interviews, however most transcription was completed later. Interviews with each individual participant took place over a two to four week time period. A two to three week time-frame was recommended to allow time to address the

interview questions, but not commit the SETs to an overwhelming time investment (Seidman, 2006).

### **Resources Used**

There are fiscal and human resources associated with conducting research. In this study, a \$50 gift certificate to a local department store for each of the 3 participating special education teachers was an associated expense. Equipment needs included an audio recorder and associated software. To assist with timely transcription of the interviews, I used a foot pedal and the transcription software *Express Scribe*. For data management I used Microsoft Word.

### **Addressing Quality**

The trustworthiness of qualitative research may be judged by how credible the findings are, how useful the findings may be for others' application, and how logical the process of the inquiry was (Schwandt, 2007). To assure readers of the quality of this research, steps were taken to ensure credibility, transferability, and dependability.

### **Credibility**

In this research the participants' understanding or "construction of reality" (Merriam, 2009, p. 214) was being studied. Credibility in this case refers to how closely the data reflect the perspectives of the participants. To strengthen credibility, the strategy known as triangulation was used. Several methods were used to collect data and various types of data were collected. Interviews were conducted with the teacher participants; direct observations of the SETs' day-to-day work was completed; documents identifying job descriptions were collected; and electronic communications were utilized to clarify questions that arose.

To further ensure credibility, I utilized member checks, asking the teacher participants to review a preliminary analysis of their interviews, requesting comments as to how well I captured their perceptions. Interviews with each SET took place over a two to four week period similar to Seidman's recommended three interview structure calling for interviews to take place over the course of two to three weeks (Seidman, 2006). This time frame allowed participants and the interviewer to reflect on the data and determine if there was more to be said. The data collection for all three schools took place in a 12 week period so gave adequate opportunity for observation and involvement with sites and participants. Use of the Theory of Planned Behavior as a frame for questions guided the discussion of the SETs' work, and use of the structure of 3 interviews allowed for the influence of the participants' life story on the data, opening the possibilities that other explanations for role enactment may play out. I utilized the theoretical framework, the Theory of Planned Behavior, to organize findings.

### **Transferability**

To address transferability I attempted to provide enough descriptive information to allow readers to determine whether this case is sufficiently similar to a case in their purview for the findings to be applicable. I provide detailed descriptions of the settings, the participants, and the findings, incorporating evidence from the data to authenticate those descriptions. My aim is to provide a clear enough picture to allow readers to compare the context of the study to their contexts. Readers may then make their own determinations as to the study's relevance for them.

### **Dependability**

In qualitative research dependability, or reliability, pertains to whether the results make sense given the data collected. In other words, are the data and the results

consistent (Merriam, 2009)? In addition to triangulation, an audit trail of investigative activities documents the dependability of the findings. My dependability as the researcher is documented by the reflexive subjectivity statement, use of peer reviewers, and by providing an audit trail to demonstrate my adherence to ethical research standards.

### **The Qualitative Narrative**

The findings from this study are presented as a combination of participant profiles and thematic narrative. Profiles of the SETs and their contexts are presented in Chapter 4, followed by a discussion of points of analysis across cases in Chapter 5. Conclusion, implications, and recommendations are presented in Chapter 6.

Table 3-1. School Enrollments

	School A (Milton)	School B (Harding)	School C (Thomas Paine)
Total Enrollment <sup>a</sup>	537	459	645
Students With Disabilities <sup>a</sup>	79 (14.7%)	39 (8.5%)	97 (15%)
% Students FRL <sup>b</sup>	54%	52%	53%
# Students ELL <sup>c</sup>	11 (2%)	104 (22.7%)	6 (<1%)
Total Instructional Staff <sup>a f</sup>	39 (2010-2011 SAR) 42 (2011-2012 SIP)	36 (2010-2011 SAR) <sup>f</sup> 39 (2011-2012 SIP)	48 (2010-2011 SAR) <sup>f</sup> 53 (2011-2012 SIP)

<sup>a</sup>SPAR = school public accountability report

School A

([http://doeweb-prd.doe.state.fl.us/eds/nclbspar/year1011/nclb1011.cfm?dist\\_schl=1\\_531](http://doeweb-prd.doe.state.fl.us/eds/nclbspar/year1011/nclb1011.cfm?dist_schl=1_531))

School B

([http://doeweb-prd.doe.state.fl.us/eds/nclbspar/year1011/nclb1011.cfm?dist\\_schl=1\\_31](http://doeweb-prd.doe.state.fl.us/eds/nclbspar/year1011/nclb1011.cfm?dist_schl=1_31))

School C ([http://doeweb-prd.doe.state.fl.us/eds/nclbspar/year1011/nclb1011.cfm?dist\\_schl=1\\_541](http://doeweb-prd.doe.state.fl.us/eds/nclbspar/year1011/nclb1011.cfm?dist_schl=1_541))

<sup>f</sup>SIP= school improvement plan (<http://www.flbsi.org/sip/>)

<sup>b</sup> Florida department of education free/reduced lunches by school 2011-12 survey 2 data as of 05/21/12 preliminary data school totals

<sup>c</sup> Florida department of education English language learners (code ly) 2011-12 survey 2 data as of 5/29/12

Table 3-2. Descriptive Information of Participants

	Teacher A (Annie)	Teacher B (Emma)	Teacher C (Karen)
Gender	Female	Female	Female
Age	48	57	52
Ethnicity	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian
Bachelor's Major	Special Education	Special Education	Special Education (MR)
Age at Bachelor's	21	22	22
Master's Major	Special Education	Special Education	Special Education (SLD/EH)
Age at Master's	22	28	23
Certifications	Special Education K-12 Pre-K ESE: Endorsement Pre -K Primary: (elementary to grade 3)	Special Education K-12 (MR, SLD, EH ) Elementary Education	Special Education K-12 (SLD, EH, MR) Elementary Education
Years Teaching	27	33	30
Years teaching Special Ed.	27	33	30
Years teaching at this school	7	20	13

## CHAPTER 4 TEACHER PROFILES

This multiple case, qualitative research study investigated how three elementary level special educators in one school district articulated and enacted their roles. This chapter will present a profile of each of the three SETs, considered through the lens of the Theory of Planned Behavior. First a brief review of features common to the schools is presented, followed by a brief note about the Theory of Planned Behavior. This is followed by the three special education teacher profiles. Profiles are presented in an order that illustrates a continuum in the instructional configurations utilized in these schools: including inclusive instruction in general education classes, a mix of co-teaching and resource room, and resource only. Chapter 4 ends with my reflections, as the researcher, on my engagement with the participants. Findings from an analysis across the cases are presented in Chapter 5.

### **Features Common to the Schools**

There are common factors among the three schools that have relevance to this study. In each, approximately 53% of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch, qualifying them as Title 1 schools. Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is a federally funded program developed to supplement educational opportunities in high poverty schools. Each school employs two Title 1 teachers who tutor students for supplemental reading and or math instruction. The Title 1 programs are relevant to this study because of their use within multi-tiered instruction and how they interact with scheduling of special education services.

Scheduling instruction is affected by certain time restrictions in these schools. Students in this district attend school for 6 hours per day. From those 6 hours, 30

minutes is allotted for lunch, leaving only 5.5 hours for instruction. In elementary schools 4.5 hours are dedicated to uninterrupted instructional blocks for reading, writing, math, and science. The state of Florida also requires that students participate in physical education for a minimum of 150 minutes per week, which poses a time constraint for special education resource programs. Students cannot be removed from their core reading, math, or science instructional times for Title 1 tutoring, so typically children are tutored in the place of art, music, or social studies instruction. Special education may be provided during core subject instruction if the special educator is the teacher of record. Students may not be removed from their primary reading or math class for supplemental instruction. These contextual features can influence how SETs feel about their roles, how others view their roles, and how they enact their roles in school settings (Billingsley, 2011; Gersten et al. 2001).

According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), people's intention to perform a behavior is shaped by three constructs. A person's *attitudes about a behavior* stem from beliefs about the attributes of the behavior and/or the consequences of performing the behavior. A *subjective norm* arises from what a person believes about the normative expectations of others regarding the behavior. This may be construed as social pressure. *Perceived behavioral control*, the "perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior" (Ajzen, 2002, p. 665), arises from what a person believes about the presence of facilitators and barriers. In this study the behavior being explored was teaching special education. The Theory of Planned Behavior was used to probe the thinking of the teachers as they made decisions about role enactment. This theoretical perspective is also utilized in organizing the presentation of the findings.

## **Profile of Annie McNamara**

*“Probably 98% of a special education teacher's job should be problem-solving” (P1, I1, p.1<sup>1</sup>)*

Forty-eight year old Annie McNamara has been a special education teacher for 27 years. She had planned to become a lawyer until as a teenager she found a “higher purpose” through work with a boy with multiple, severe special needs. Annie holds both a bachelor’s and a master’s degree in special education. Her teaching certifications include special education (kindergarten through grade 12), with a pre-kindergarten special education endorsement; pre-kindergarten/primary (age 3 through grade three); and National Board Certification as an Exceptional Needs Specialist. Annie added a primary elementary certification seven years ago to be more marketable. Her subsequent job search resulted in her current employment. Annie’s previous teaching experience includes middle school, all elementary grades, and many years in prekindergarten.

Annie has taught at Milton Elementary School (MES) for seven years, arriving the year before the school began to fully include students with disabilities in general education classrooms. During Annie’s first year at Milton, the faculty participated in professional development activities to prepare for the implementation of inclusive practices in the upcoming year.

### **Annie’s Context**

MES is located on the outskirts of the town, adjacent to newer duplexes and single family homes; the large campus shaded by ancient oak trees. The small town has

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<sup>1 1</sup> Citations for quotes from the participants are denoted in this format (P#, I#, p.#) to indicate participant, interview number and page number in transcripts.

retained much of its rural nature, although it has grown into a bedroom community of the nearby city, where the school district offices are located. Enrollment of 537 students, grades Kindergarten through 4, put MES in the middle among the three schools in the study. The school employs multi-tiered systems for academic and behavioral support. MES is a professional development school in partnership with the local university. The school hosts a number of pre-service education students as they intern and complete practicums, supervised by in-service teachers and university faculty. Annie noted that it was the philosophy of the administration to have high quality educators model best instructional practices to others, whether interns or in service teachers. The school was also participating in a pilot study using assistive technology software.

### **Special Education at Milton Elementary**

The percentage of students with disabilities at MES was similar to that of the largest school in the study, at nearly 15% of the student population. MES was an inclusive school Kindergarten through grade 4. Three SETs co-taught in general education classrooms during the reading instructional block, scheduled throughout the day. There was also a pre-kindergarten special education classroom. Several paraprofessionals were assigned to the special education program, some to individual students. Students who might, in another school, have been assigned to a self-contained classroom were assigned full time paraprofessionals within general education classes. For these students the SET was scheduled in for the reading block. Another SET might also spend some period of time in the class with this student. Paraprofessionals could be rotated in and out of the classroom. Annie was quick to point out that it would be difficult for a visitor to pair a student to a paraprofessional

because the paraprofessionals are utilized throughout the classrooms, “we don’t believe in Velcro aides here.”

There was a full time Speech/Language Pathologist, however Occupational Therapy and Physical Therapy services were provided by itinerant therapists. OT was provided primarily within the classrooms. Annie indicated that insufficient OT support prior to the current year precipitated a blending of OT and assistive technology (AT) at MES.

The special education population at Milton Elementary included students with specific learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, emotional/behavioral disorders, language impairments, and orthopedic impairments. Although no currently enrolled students were eligible for services under the categorical identifier of intellectual disability, Annie indicated that in her view some students identified as having other health impairments may also have an intellectual disability. At the time of the interviews Annie would not characterize any of the students as having severe/profound disabilities.

### **Assignment**

Serving a caseload of 20 students, Annie co-taught in three first grade classrooms and one kindergarten classroom during 90-minute reading blocks. She shared responsibility for planning, teaching, managing behavior, and assigning grades for all students in these classrooms with the four general education teachers. Midway through the school year special education enrollment increased at the fourth grade so Annie and another SET shared co-teaching one day per week in an additional classroom. Consistent with the co-teaching model, Annie did not have a classroom of her own. Her assigned space was a large storage area where she could work at her desk or at a small table. Teaching materials filled the deep, floor to ceiling shelves on

every wall and overflowed onto the floor and table. Most materials were clearly labeled and Annie made all materials available to any teacher in the school.

Annie also held leadership positions within the school. She was the special education team leader, responsible for disseminating information to and garnering input from others on her team. She developed the schedule for paraprofessionals and provided training to them. She also facilitated special education professional development to special education team members and other faculty. Annie served on the Curriculum Council, an advisory and action team of teachers that worked with the administration regarding curricular matters. She, along with all of the SETs, served on the functional behavioral assessment team. Annie was a co-facilitator of the Kindergarten RtI team and was actively involved in the design and implementation of multi-tiered interventions for students not yet identified as needing special education. She regarded this early intervention as part of her changing role as a special education teacher and indicated that engaging with students during the early intervention process informed decisions for students later determined eligible for special education services.

### **Annie McNamara and the Theory of Planned Behavior**

#### **Attitudes about the Teaching Special Education**

Annie McNamara believes meeting the needs of students is the first priority of special education teachers; she believes this is best accomplished in general education settings through collaboration with general education colleagues. She feels an urgent need to intervene early in a child's life preparing students to become functional members of society and lifelong learners. She believes special education teaching is a service profession that requires problem solving, advocacy, and mentoring.

When Annie was asked to relate what it means to her to be a special educator, her response indicated a strong child centered focus to her work.

It means meeting individual kids' needs at their level and doing what's best for kids, not what's necessarily best or easiest for adults, but doing the hard stuff, and the easy stuff, that's going to help kids become functional members of society no matter what their abilities or disabilities are. (P1, I1, p. 1)

Annie was adamant that students take precedence. She believes that a SET must be committed, even passionate, about doing what is best for the child, even though it may be more difficult for the adult. "Bottom line is we all have a job because of the kids and the kids' needs. People forget that. They think it's the other way around a lot of the time" (P1, I1, p.17). Annie values "the opportunity to really make a difference in a young child's life" (P1, I1, p.9).

Annie feels an urgency to have an impact on children with special educational needs, stating that teachers have only a limited amount of time in which to give students the best possible education. Annie's years working with pre-kindergarten children unleashed an advocacy for early intervention. From her perspective, identification and extensive utilization of supports and strategies early in a child's schooling can lead to later self-sufficiency. Annie believes her students must communicate and work cooperatively with others, in order to grow into adults that live independently, are employed, and are lifelong learners. Although she acknowledges the importance of reading, writing and math skills to that end, for Annie, dealing with behavior is the top priority when students present with behavioral issues that interfere with the educational process. Annie argued that she must take the time to shape students' behavior or there will not be much chance of academic or social success. She has great faith in the ability of her general education counterparts to teach and assess the academic skills

students need, but sees herself as the change agent when it comes to behavioral programs.

Annie believes that inclusive schools are the best setting for students with special education needs. In her opinion pull-out resource or self-contained special education classes lead to students being removed from the mainstream community of the school. General education teachers can think of these students needing special education as “other” and let go of responsibility for them. She compared SETs in resource rooms to the Title 1 intervention teachers currently at work in the school, “kind of like an appendage, not an integrated part of the day-to-day workings of the school” (P1, I3, p.11). These teachers can become concerned only with their small group of students and be isolated from the processes of school as a whole. The isolation of both the students and the teachers is a concern for Annie who sees herself as a champion of both.

Annie believes that all students can learn in a general education classroom if given the right supports and accommodations. She pointed out that the students with disabilities in this inclusive school, predominately students with high incidence disabilities, have made some of the greatest academic growth in the state. She sees academic and social interactions that occur in her co-teach classrooms benefit her students. Opportunities over the years to work with a variety of support personnel and therapists helped Annie gain the knowledge and tools that she believes help her design and provide supports students need to access the general education curriculum within an inclusive school.

The belief that students with special education needs can and should be taught in general education classrooms is not the perspective with which Annie began her career in the 1980s. Her goal then was to teach in a center school for students with severe/profound disabilities, a service model that was prevalent at the time. Annie recalls feeling, even then, that her students needed to be less isolated. One reason she “feels so powerfully about inclusive settings is that the very youngest of children easily learn to accept people of varying abilities and disabilities, strengths and weakness, and just know one another as friend” (P1, I3, p. 26). She believes acceptance will come only from being a part of the mainstream of society.

Annie sees her role as a SET as providing service, first to the students and secondly to their teachers. Annie indicated she has always believed special education was about the students. However, when she started out she did not realize how concerned she would become about the welfare of the teachers with whom she works. She values opportunities to collaborate with general education teachers and other education professionals who have knowledge, and may have perspectives, different from hers. Annie believes providing support to her colleagues through collaboration and problem solving can allow teachers to more effectively serve their students.

A part of Annie’s service and advocacy involves working with parents. Annie is the parent of a young adult with a learning disability. Although she entered the field of special education before she became a parent, her life experience informs her teaching. Annie values having the opportunity to work with other parents and helping them see potential in their children. She recognizes that parents have a life outside of the school and is sensitive to the day-to-day pressures that may be aggravated or multiplied by

having a child with special needs. She willingly offers to listen and help with concerns parents may present but does not push. She understands that some parents want her to provide emotional support for them as well as for their children, but others may not even identify her as their child's teacher.

Annie believes strongly in the responsibility of practicing educators to be involved in guiding those entering the profession, and also values the connection to cutting edge research that relationship to the university through interns brings. Because she felt she could not devote adequate time or energy to the task, she chose not to supervise a full time intern this school year. However, she was mentoring a part time practicum student and had signed up to mentor a full time intern again next year. "I try to talk myself out of it all the time but I really can't because I just feel like it's too important. If we really want quality educators we have to train them." (P1, I1, p. 9)

Annie is passionate about her role as an advocate. Annie sees herself as something of a maverick, at times making people uncomfortable as she pushes for what she thinks is right for a child.

I think that everybody has something valuable to give and that we're all put on this earth to interact with one another, affect one another's belief systems, and just challenge one another to be better people. I think ultimately kids with special needs play that ultimate role because it challenges what people believe about who they are and how they interact in their world, and what's valuable, and who's valuable, and who's not. ( P1, I3, pp. 25-26)

Annie's beliefs about special education teaching stem from deeply held personal convictions and values. She identified herself as a person of faith who believes that God determines where her influence will be directed. Her early career experiences teaching people with low incidence, severe disabilities show through in the importance

she places on teaching social and functional skills. Special education teaching is Annie's calling.

### **Subjective Norm**

To uncover Annie's beliefs about the normative expectations of others and social pressures regarding special education teaching, she was asked to identify others' expectations of her, individuals and factors that shape how she envisions her role, and pressures she felt when doing various tasks throughout her school day. Annie responded to these questions by sharing her understanding of what her students, colleagues, and administrators expect from her.

Annie's response to the question about factors that shape her role reflected her child focus.

The students, they're first and foremost. Their needs shape my role most definitely and with the most impact. Their needs influence how much I need to go to bat for them, how much I need to push the envelope with a co-teacher...or how much I have to educate another person that this is why we're doing this with this kid. (P1, I3, p. 24)

Annie said that students expect her to love them. They need her to let every day be a new day.

If they know that everyday's a new day and that you love them no matter what they've done or how they've performed, whether it's their best or their worst, then you're going to make progress with them and they're going to work for you. (P1, I2, p.12)

Annie's students want her acceptance. She believes that if students know that she loves them unconditionally the rest will fall into place.

Annie indicated that the expectations of, and her relationships with, her co-teachers have a great deal of influence on how she enacts her role. Annie believes her co-teachers expect her to support them, to demonstrate camaraderie and collegiality as

they work together to address the needs of their shared students. She pointed out that the way in which general education teachers see their own role is reflected in how they see hers. When she works with a general educator who sees his or her role as meeting individual student needs, that teacher will see Annie's role as working with individual students on whatever they need, at a pace that may not align with the core curriculum. Annie is comfortable with that. However, when she works in classrooms where teachers see their role as more bound to the curriculum and pacing, it is more challenging for Annie. Teachers with that perspective may see Annie's role as keeping the student on pace with the rest of the class and with the district's pacing guide. Annie believes that SETs must be like chameleons, able to adapt to whatever setting they are in. "Special educators have to be the most flexible people on campus" (P1, I3, p. 24) adjusting their priorities and practices as they go through the day, based upon what and whom they encounter. This need to adapt was evident the day I observed when an unanticipated schedule change at one grade level had Annie shifting her plan for the day, seamlessly alerting teachers and paraprofessionals to the adjustment as we walked from one classroom to another.

Annie's special education teammates expect her to speak for them to the administration, to share information with them, and to help them problem solve when necessary. She is the most experienced member of the team. One of the SETs was Annie's intern last year. Another teammate came to MES five years ago as a first year teacher so Annie informally mentored her. Annie remains a resource and sounding board for them, although she has seen them grow increasingly independent in their decision making.

The behavior resource teacher (BRT) and curriculum resource teacher (CRT) are members of the school leadership team who expect Annie to be a resource to them, to other teachers, and to support staff. They expect Annie to provide early intervention to students through the Rtl process. Annie believes the CRT would say the SET's job is to assure that students with IEPs have what they need and are successful academically.

Annie feels a great deal of pressure from the school community. She stated that when she's doing something she feels to be right, there is a constant feeling that somebody thinks she should be doing something else, or doing things differently. She believes that feeling this pressure is part of the job and of the inclusion model that they have at Milton.

All the time, all day long, every day, when I'm doing what I think I need to be doing there's always somebody else that thinks that you should be doing something a little bit differently, or in a different way or whatever. I think that's just part of the job and the type of set up we have. There's always going to be people that think that you are or aren't doing what you're supposed to be doing. It's just what it is. I try to put those out of my mind and focus on the kids; until they come to a head or right to my face and then I deal with it at that point. I've always said that I think a lot of misconceptions and a lot of misinformation happens because people have different perspectives on things and I really try to see my role not only from my perspective, but from the perspective of all my colleagues. (P1, I2, p.17)

Annie tries to see her role through others' eyes so that she can understand how her actions may be viewed. She attempts to be available to assist any teacher and makes all of her teaching materials available to the entire school faculty. She feels that there are some teachers, with whom she does not co-teach, who may resent choices she makes in dealing with students. However, she believes there are more who respect and value what she does, both for the students and for the teachers at the school. Annie sometimes worries that others expect her to always be able to solve problems that arise, and although she is willing to give 110% most of the time, she is not infallible.

She admits she may have a heightened sense of what others expect from her, and that her expectations of self probably exceed those of others.

Annie feels the pressures for a SET are in some ways very much the same as for general education teachers, but in some ways are much different. Many of the requirements for lesson planning and paperwork are the same. However, there are additional procedural and legal requirements associated with special education. She feels that sometimes her general education co-teachers seem to forget that she collaborates with a number of other colleagues and has many more students with whom she interacts. "My ideal day rarely happens because it shifts based on student needs, teacher needs, administration needs, you know, just a lot of different variables in the day. So yeah, there are a lot of pressures" (P1, I3, p.23).

Annie stated that she is greatly influenced by the expectations of her administrator, to do what is in the best interest of the students. Much of the impetus for including all students with special education needs in the general education classrooms at MES came from the principal. Annie's understanding of the school's mission, to put children's needs first, allows her to comfortably fit into the context within which she works.

Then of course the expectations of the administration, what she sees me as needing to accomplish, or needing to provide input on, or staying out of when I think I need to be in it. I guess those are the criteria here that shape what I do. (P1, I3, p.25)

Annie believes the school principal expects her to handle anything put before her.

Although she values the trust this implies, and is motivated by the principal's respect for her professionalism, Annie feels a certain amount of pressure to perform.

## **Perceived Behavioral Control**

Annie recognizes that including students with special education needs to the extent they do in general education classrooms at MES is a difficult model to implement and sustain. It takes a great deal of problem solving and collaboration on the part of the school staff. It also has required support from the district special education office.

Annie found that within the context of MES and the school district there were a number of features, such as the schedule, the attitudes of her co-teachers, and the leadership, which served to facilitate her ability to enact her role as SET. There were also factors that presented more as barriers, such as state and district level mandates, miscommunication, and excessive assessment, making it more difficult for her to do her work the way in which she believes it should be done.

**Facilitators.** The school schedule was designed to allow for three SETs to co-teach in general education classrooms. Co-teaching took place during the reading block, which meant that some classes had reading late in the school day. Most teachers would prefer to have reading first thing in the morning when children are fresh, but this was impossible with a school wide co-teach model, given the number of special education staff. Annie's co-teachers shared her commitment to the inclusion model so willingly accepted that, for some, reading block would occur later in the day. The schedule also meant that in first grade, because there were three co-teach classes, homerooms did not follow the same school day schedule, and teachers did not have a common planning time. An aspect of the schedule different from other schools was that the SETs did not take daily planning periods, but built their contracted planning time into Wednesdays when the school schedules are altered due to early release of students.. This allowed them to be in classrooms for reading four days per week. The extended

time on Wednesday was used for meetings, assessment, ongoing progress monitoring, and planning. Later in the year, when a co-teach class was added in fourth grade, the SETs went into that classroom on Wednesdays, without changing the schedule for the rest of the week.

Annie regarded her colleagues' attitudes as facilitating her work. The special educators and most general education teachers, particularly those who choose to co-teach, share Annie's belief in inclusion and desire to do what is right for the children. Many of her general education counterparts are quite experienced teachers and provide support to Annie when she has questions or concerns. Teachers' willingness to meet with her beyond their contracted hours to co-plan instruction demonstrated their dedication and commitment.

The co-teachers opened their classrooms not only to Annie, but to a number of paraprofessionals and pre-service interns. Annie recognized that this takes organization and flexibility. Annie understands that not every teacher is comfortable with co-teaching and that there are times when a talented regular education teacher who has been successful with co-teaching needs a break from it. Several students with special education needs are assigned to each co-teach classroom so that Annie can serve all of her students by going into four classrooms. I observed 5 students identified as having special education needs in one class of 18. At least one other student was receiving early intervention services with frequent progress monitoring. That meant that a third of the class was in need of some specialized instruction. Although the general education teacher was joined by a full time paraprofessional and an intern, the SET was present for 90 minutes four days per week. "It's not just the time I'm in there. It's all day

long and that's pretty intensive" (P1, I2, p.5). Annie indicated that managing the special education and general education needs of students as well as managing support resources could be difficult for general educators. Nevertheless, in this school, general education teachers volunteer to co-teach.

Annie remarked that the principal is a facilitator, with a clear vision of what she wants to accomplish in her school. Annie reported that she is a proactive leader who invites input from the staff and worked through issues with them. Annie appreciates the opportunity this allows her to have a voice within the management of the school. The principal allows Annie to make up the paraprofessionals' schedule; a task suited to Annie's knowledge of the needs of the children and teachers. The principal provides resources needed to implement inclusion effectively and advocates for the school with the district office. The principal is a planner. When new initiatives come from the district Annie sees her principal as preferring to determine at the school level how to implement directives, rather than wait for dictates. She would rather be the model for the district than be forced to implement something in a way that does not work well for this school. Annie sees others on the school leadership team as resources for her as well. Annie and the BRT often work closely to problem solve situations that arise, develop behavior plans for students, or assist one another in thinking through a student's behavioral issues.

Annie sees the school's multi-tiered system of academic and behavioral supports (MTSS) for students as a way for the philosophy of special education (i.e., meeting individual student's needs) to become a mainstream principle in general education. According to Annie special educators have been differentiating instruction since the

inception of the discipline. She believes MTSS forces educators to look within every classroom at what individual children need and at how the instruction is being delivered. There may be a mismatch between the strategies used to teach the concept and how the student learns. A teacher may not be skilled enough to see this difference, thus Annie's expertise as a SET can be valuable for early intervention in the general education classroom.

Annie believes that the district special education department has been very supportive of the efforts of MES to include students in general education classes. Initial training at the school was provided by the district team of inclusion specialists, one of whom Annie continues to work with closely. The district also provides an assistive technology specialist that Annie feels has been very supportive of Milton's efforts to include their students.

**Barriers.** Although Annie sees the district ESE office as supportive, she identified communication break down between the district ESE office and the school as a barrier. Annie indicated that the district counts on the staffing specialist, who comes to the school on a regular basis to facilitate eligibility determination meetings and IEP meetings, to share information with the schools. She suspects both the staffing specialist and the district office are uncertain as to what has been communicated previously and what needs to be communicated to the school. The result of this miscommunication is missed deadlines, paperwork being incomplete or incorrect, and therefore students not being evaluated or staffed in a timely manner.

I think if we improved our ways to disseminate information to make sure that the people who actually have to do the processes understand what they're doing, I think there'd be a lot more people on board and a lot more buy in to some of these programs. (P1, I2, p.3)

Annie feels strongly that general education administrators at the district level do not understand the impact of curricular decisions on efforts at inclusion. Annie believes too much of all teachers' time is spent completing overwhelming paperwork, stemming from accountability requirements. She expressed the opinion that district mandates regarding lesson planning, assessment, curriculum, pacing, and professional development frequently insult the professionalism of teachers in that these directives hamper creativity and independence.

I think that the people who make the expectations don't really realize. They haven't been in a classroom in a very long time. They don't realize everything. They don't talk to one another there to see how much the teacher's being asked to do. And it's not humanly possible a lot of times so they just do the best they can. That's all we can ask of them. (P1, I3,p. 22)

She believes that district personnel responsible for general education and those responsible for special education do not communicate clearly with one another and the result is often duplicative work and inconsistency that teachers are left to deal with. More importantly she feels that students' needs get lost.

Annie's involvement in the Rtl process through the grade level Rtl team and her work in inclusive classrooms allow her a clear view of general education teachers' frustration. She understands and supports the concept of Rtl but sees school level implementation, as it pertains to special education eligibility, as overly complex and muddled. Annie was disturbed to hear disgruntled general education teachers indicate they did not want to go through the work of finding out if a student had a learning disability because the process was too cumbersome. For her part, Annie believes that educators must do everything in their power to help a child be successful as quickly as possible. Having to implement interventions incrementally to establish effectiveness is frustrating to her. She does not like to see students struggle before changing

interventions and fears that repeated failures will contribute to future problems such as poor self-image and dislike of school. She would much rather apply everything she can think of to support a child's efforts as quickly as she can and withdraw supports that are unneeded.

Annie feels she has little control over how much of her time is spent in student assessment. She senses this is a pressure felt by her regular education counterparts as well. Teachers may focus solely on skills students need to pass the tests and not only leave out, but may resent time spent on, instruction that would encourage functional learning and life skills. Annie argues forcefully that the time spent on assessment and paperwork substantially reduces instructional time. MES conducts schoolwide simulations of high stakes testing to acquaint students with testing conditions. This includes Annie proctoring individual practice tests for students with testing accommodations. Annie acknowledges value in assessing student achievement for instructional planning purposes, but she feels the lengths to which state and district wide testing have gone is unwieldy and potentially harmful to students. She is concerned that the students whose self-concept may be most susceptible to repeated failures on academic tests spend large amounts of their school careers participating in formal, often high stakes, assessment.

Annie indicated there are certain things she has no control over, such as the number of SETs allocated to the school. Allocations of special education staffing resources are dependent upon state funding models and numbers of identified students. In response to factors such as those, district and school administrators determine the

models of service delivery at the school level. Annie asserts control over how she implements her role within the framework of her teaching context.

I don't have control over the allocation to our school; I don't have control over a lot of things, but you know I really don't think about that stuff. I just kind of think about what I can work within and I work within what I 'm given, and do the best for the most kids I can and for the most teachers that I can support. (P1, I3, p. 15)

Ultimately Annie controls whether she completes a task or gives assistance to a teacher at a particular time. Although it can be very stressful, taxing, even overwhelming to work with others to determine how best to serve students, she cannot in good conscience put off teachers who request help from her. She believes that in order to be effective in what they do for students, teachers need to support one another. Therefore, she prefers to make herself available to whoever needs her support at any given time.

Annie indicated that the attitudes of most of her colleagues facilitated her role enactment; nevertheless there were some faculty members who did not whole heartedly embrace inclusion or Annie's approaches, which at times hindered her work. Parent attitudes toward school could also be a barrier to fulfilling her role as she sees fit. Some parents have negative memories of school and may fear some of the interventions that are being offered to their children. When asked if her comfort level with any specific task influenced her decisions regarding what to do each day, Annie laughed and said "you can tell I hate paperwork, so you know that's always on the back burner" (P1, I3, p. 23). Yet Annie is confident in her ability to interact positively with students which influences her day to day focus on student issues.

## **How Annie Enacts Her Role**

As Annie sees it the crux of her role, and that of every SET, is that of a problem solver. “Problem solve” is a verb in Annie’s vocabulary. Whether she is helping a teacher design a behavioral intervention, a modification to curriculum, or a visual schedule; whether she is helping a student respond to academic tasks or identifying possible reinforcements for a behavior plan; whether she is advising the administrators or discussing a child with a parent, she “problem solves”.

Annie views her role as multi-faceted and stated that “no two days are the same” (P1, I1, p.3). From her perspective, Annie and the general educators who are co-teaching with her share ownership for all of the students in the classrooms. She and her partners utilize various models of instructional co-teaching delivery: one teaches while one supports, parallel teaching, each teaches a small group or facilitates a workstation, or team teaching a whole group lesson. During the course of the observation day I saw each of these models in action, except team teaching whole group. Classrooms utilized literacy and math workstations, a practice that lends itself to individualization and differentiation of skills. Annie indicated the teachers’ roles are interchangeable while co-teaching and she enjoys the flow back and forth between teachers and among instructional activities.

Annie believes collecting and using skill mastery data to inform instruction is valuable, however she bristles over the amount and types of assessment required. She and her co-teachers use curriculum-based assessments regularly. I observed adults in classrooms checking student performance on assigned tasks and content, something Annie indicated happens on a daily basis. She reported regularly carrying a notebook with her to classrooms to record the data she collects. Annie holds more stock in

curriculum checklists, informal observations, and anecdotal notes, than in many of the more formal tests that are required. She feels the ongoing progress monitoring tools developed at the district level are poorly aligned with the curriculum, resulting in teachers and students spending more time than necessary in progress monitoring. Because much of the assessment Annie does with students is individualized, she feels she loses considerable instructional time. Not only must teachers do ongoing progress monitoring of those students who are at risk, but the Rtl requirement for peer comparison data has increased the burden of individual assessments for all primary grade students. She noted that her co-teachers have learned they will not see her in the classroom during certain months of the year when there is a heavy assessment load.

Working closely with paraprofessionals at the school, particularly with those assigned to the grade levels in which she co-teaches, is important to Annie. She calls the paraprofessionals her “bridge” to the classroom, collaborating with her to support the students and teachers. She sets up their schedules, prepares the interventions and assessments they use with students, trains them, observes them, and coaches them. Although the principal completes the annual evaluations of the paraprofessionals Annie is asked to provide input.

The scheduling of IEP meetings is another matter that Annie deems significant. School personnel try to schedule IEP meetings to fit parent schedules, however, Annie prefers to hold IEP meetings after students are released for the day, so that she can devote her time and attention to the parent and the child. Annie feels that when meetings are scheduled before or during the instructional day, worries about classroom

coverage take away from the focus of the participants. She believes that the IEP meeting is too important to have to rush through or do haphazardly. Furthermore, she would prefer to be in classrooms during instructional time. This year the district has moved to a State developed online IEP format that transfers among counties. Annie feels that for the most part it is a user-friendly tool that is more clearly organized and more readily understood by parents than previous versions. The document can be projected on a screen while it is being written so all present at the IEP meeting can view it. Annie conceded that there are still some issues, making it an imperfect system, but overall she is very pleased with it.

Annie chooses to work late most afternoons. Typically she is involved in administrative meetings with faculty or committees such as the RtI team, curriculum council, team leaders, lesson study team, or IEP teams right after students go home. Because she does not have a common planning time with the grade level teachers, she meets with them after contracted hours three afternoons per week to plan their teaching. Even though these afterhours sessions are no longer compensated with stipends, the teachers recognize the value of team planning and have continued to stay late for this purpose. One Friday each month, Annie meets with her ESE team after contracted hours, despite the accepted practice that avoids scheduling meetings requiring teachers to be present on Friday afternoons.

Annie feels strongly that the time she spends at school needs to be time spent with students and/or teachers. That leaves little time for writing lesson plans, building visual schedules, or compiling information to fill out the forms needed in IEP meetings. As a result Annie does much of her paperwork at home. "A teacher's job is never ever

done. You're constantly thinking about kids, the ways to implement the curriculum, ways to problem solve" (P1, I3, p. 23).

Reflecting on special education delivery over the course of her career, Annie attributed a change in her role to the advent of RtI and a school wide system of supports. In her view MTSS lends itself to inclusive practices. As a special educator at an inclusive MTSS school, Annie reported feeling stretched very thin, her role expanding to that of a co-teacher and of an interventionist. Her expertise in utilizing targeted teaching strategies and designing interventions and accommodations is now employed with a wide range of students.

I'm a major part of those classrooms in the RtI process, helping develop interventions for those kids that are struggling. And I've become more of an interventionist, like a combination of an interventionist and a special educator, because naturally special educators learn about how to work with individual student needs and strategies that work, interventions that work, accommodations that work. So that wealth of knowledge, people like to tap into. (P1, I3, p.3)

Annie clarified, "I see the interventionist as working with a child who is not special ed. but using my special ed. tools to help them make gains" (P1, I3, p.7).

The implementation of MTSS, along with the collaboration among teachers that it requires, has given Annie a broader view of the workings of the school and of how her work has an impact on the overall success of the school. She designs and implements interventions for students who are not and may never be identified as eligible for special education services. In her co-teach setting this makes good sense to her, but she worries that special education funding will be cut over time and fewer SETs will be available to do the intervention needed for children with special education needs or who need early intervention.

Annie has concerns that the miscommunication involved in steering students through the Rtl process, the length of time, and the documentation and progress monitoring requirements, has had negative effects on identification of students with special needs. She has seen a drop in the numbers of students identified as having a learning disability or language impairment. She worries that this may not be due to the existence of fewer numbers of students with disabilities, but that fewer teachers are pursuing identification because of the demands of the process. From what she can see, a result of lower numbers of students with special needs being identified is fewer SETs being hired or allocated to schools. She believes there needs to be shared funding of some sort to assure expertise continues to be available in schools.

When asked if ultimately there will continue to be a need for SETs, Annie's answer reflected a wish for a more inclusive society and a practical understanding of public education.

If we were in a perfect world, no; but I think there are still a lot of barriers to kids with disabilities in the classroom. Some of these have to go back to the pressures that are put on the teacher. It's harder to work with a student who struggles. It takes more time; it puts you off your pacing guide. I really feel there is a role for SETs, just to provide support to those teachers and those students [with disabilities]. Because one person dealing with all the different levels of kids in a classroom is a very challenging position to be in and very stressful. You know in a perfect world I would love to say every teacher loves to differentiate as part of their being. It's not realistic at this point. Maybe way in the future but right now and in the near future I think that it's looking like it's going to get worse before it gets better as far as the pressures for teachers. And I think we're going to see a lot of teachers bail out in the next few years. (P1, I3, p. 25)

Annie sees a continued need for the expertise of special educators to provide supports for both students and teachers.

One of the last questions posed to Annie was what she would do differently if she were at a different school.

I probably wouldn't be a totally inclusive teacher because that's very few and far between, the mindset of totally inclusive. I mean it would be very different and I would adapt to what my role was. And I'd probably continue to push the envelope. (P1, I3, p.24)

With this response she acknowledged the importance of context in shaping how her role is enacted. She demonstrated both her chameleon and her maverick selves.

### **Profile of Emma Kelley**

*"I do a little bit of everything"* (P2, I1, p. 3)

Fifty-seven year old Emma Kelley has been a special education teacher for 33 years. At the age of 12, after volunteering with her Girl Scout troop to assist with patterning a boy with special needs, she decided to become a SET. She majored in special education both as an undergraduate and when she returned to earn her Master's degree after teaching for a few years. Her volunteer work has continued throughout her career as she routinely tutors children before and after school.

Emma, certified in special education (MR, SLD, EH for K-12), has taught at Harding Elementary School (HES) for 20 years. Despite her experience and expertise Emma, with special education certification alone, could not be considered a highly qualified teacher. State and national policies require K-6 educators who teach reading and math to be certified in elementary education. Emma became dually certified at the end of the last school year by passing the State's elementary education exam.

### **Emma's Context**

Harding Elementary School is a brick, two storey building located in an older neighborhood consisting largely of student housing and single family homes. With an enrollment of 459 students, HES was the smallest of the three schools engaged in this study. The percentage of students with disabilities at 8.5% was roughly half that of the

other two schools; however, the percentage of English Language Learners was much higher at 22%. HES is the district's elementary level center school for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Students in the ESOL program are included in general education classes throughout the day, with the exception of their reading instruction block, which is taught by an ESOL specialist.

As with all of the elementary schools in the district, HES utilizes a multi-tiered system of academic supports for students. According to Emma, HES did not have a schoolwide structure of Positive Behavior Supports (PBS), however there was a system in place to develop and carry out individualized behavior programs for students who need that level of support. A Response to Intervention (RtI) framework was used in the process of identifying students needing special education services.

### **Special Education at Harding Elementary**

Emma is the only full time SET serving the 26 students with IEPs in six grade levels, Kindergarten through fifth grade, at HES. Other special education and related services are provided part time, on an as-needed basis. For instance, the speech-language pathologist is assigned to the school 2.5 days per week, the occupational therapist 1 day per week, and the physical therapist less regularly. An itinerant teacher certified to teach students with hearing impairments provides resource instruction for one student twice per week. Three special education paraprofessionals perform general duties, primarily providing assistance to students with disabilities in general education classrooms during mathematics instruction. Two of the paraprofessionals share responsibility for the individualized supervision of one student, rotating throughout the day.

Emma's students present with a wide range of needs and disabilities including specific learning disabilities, autism, intellectual disability, language impairment, hearing impairment, or other health impairment, including traumatic brain injury. A handful of students with special education needs are also in the ESOL program.

### **Assignment**

Special education teaching is accomplished through two instructional configurations: co-teaching and resource room. A small number of students receive only consultation services from the SET. This year Emma co-taught a fourth grade reading and writing class during a 105 minute block of time. Ten students with disabilities joined 12 general education students in this class of 22 students. The teachers utilized the general education core curriculum provided by the district, including its materials designed for students reading below grade level. They also used alternative reading materials to differentiate instruction. Emma shared lesson planning and grading responsibilities with her general education partner.

Emma co-taught only at fourth grade. Students receiving special education at other grade levels remained with their general education classes, or went to ESOL class, for the 90 minute reading block. The only time Emma saw these students was during their regularly scheduled science, social studies, or writing classes, to provide a double dose of reading in the resource setting. Consequently, at the upper grade levels she included science content in her reading instruction. Fourth grade is the only level where Emma collaboratively planned instruction. At other grade levels she was solely responsible for adapting instruction and planning her curriculum. She did, however, consult with teachers regarding students' curricular and instructional needs.

Scheduling has also been part of Emma's assignment. For many years Emma has been responsible for developing her own schedule and the schedule for the special education paraprofessionals. Emma provides training for the paraprofessionals and is asked to furnish input to the principal for their evaluations. In years past Emma was team leader for special education staff at Harding. Now, due to the dwindling number of staff, Emma sits on the fourth grade team, chosen because that is the grade level she co-teaches. She prefers being part of a grade level team, feeling it enhances her inclusion as part of, not separate from, the faculty.

Emma provided support to students at various levels in HES's multi-tiered system. Much of the instruction she provided in her resource classroom was considered tier 3 intervention. In the co-teach setting she provided early intervening services to students not enrolled in special education. For some students receiving special education services, for instance those children with developmental disabilities approaching age 6, Emma provided interventions intended to assist in determining if specific learning disabilities or language impairments were present. Emma was part of the team that was initially trained by the district to implement the Rtl process for purposes of disability identification. Last year she was heavily involved in training classroom teachers to implement interventions and collect progress monitoring data. According to Emma, this year teachers are proceeding with the process independent of her.

## **Emma Kelley and the Theory of Planned Behavior**

### **Attitudes about Teaching Special Education**

Emma perceives special education as ascertaining the best ways to teach individuals based upon a student's needs and strengths. Throughout our interviews she repeatedly indicated that her activities depended upon what students needed.

Emma believes it is her responsibility to develop her expertise in order to best teach her students, and then to seed the school with that knowledge. She maintains memberships in professional associations, reads special education journals, and referred to research during our conversations. Over the years she has sought training in programs that respond to her students' wide range of learning needs and disabilities, such as ESOL, Lindamood (Lindamood & Lindamood, 1998), Wilson Reading Systems (Wilson, 1988), Reading Mastery (Engelmann, 2003), and Project TEACCH from the University of North Carolina, a program that has been very helpful for students with autism. Emma was very aware of the compounded difficulties experienced by ESOL students with specific learning disabilities. She recognizes that students with learning disabilities may also have behavioral presentations that interfere with their access to instruction. She was one of the first people at HES trained to implement the individualized, leveled behavioral program that is used at several schools in the district. Emma uses her knowledge to determine which curricula or modification may be best for use with particular students, then as appropriate, to train teachers and paraprofessionals to utilize them. Even as she approaches retirement in two years, Emma has plans to continue her professional development around aspects of teaching she feels are her weaknesses.

Emma feels strongly that it is the responsibility of general education classroom teachers to follow through with recommendations she makes through the consultation process. Whenever she trains a paraprofessional to work with a student in the general education class, whether on a curriculum or a behavior modification, she also trains the classroom teacher. This way the teacher can perform the routines with the student and can supervise the paraprofessional appropriately.

I trained the teacher and the aide with that because it's important for the teacher to keep up with that. I never want to walk into the room and do consult and say 'where is he on this program, can you show me in your book' and the teacher's like, 'I don't know where the book is'. (P2, I2B, p.13)

It is important to Emma that teachers remember their responsibility to teach all students in their classrooms. She would like to see certification in special education required for all regular classroom teachers, just as they are currently required to hold ESOL endorsement. She posits this would play a role in changing teachers' perceptions, opening them to greater understanding of students needing special education. Over the years that Emma has worked at HES she has provided a great deal of special education professional development to teachers. When I asked whether she thought at the beginning of her career that she would spend so much time educating teachers she indicated she had always expected that would be part of the job. She pointed out that while in college her professors told her classes they would be the experts in their schools. When she started teaching in the 1970s principals communicated the same message.

Emma believes that students with special needs should be able to participate in the experiences common to the school's population. However, she is concerned that the pressures of academic pacing and class size can be overwhelming for some

children, who may thrive in a smaller, quieter, less demanding environment. Therefore, she is not convinced that fully inclusive schools are the answer for all students.

It's sort of been my own little private mission to have some inclusion at Harding. I'm not someone that necessarily agrees that that's the best thing for every ESE child because I think every ESE child is different. Some students just need maybe less pressure than they might feel in the regular classroom because of the number of students and the size of the classroom, and also the pacing of the academics. I mean part of me thinks yes, full inclusion, but then I think of these little kids that do better when they just have a quiet place to go. (P2, I1, p.6)

Emma believes SETs are essential. Special educators develop an expertise, layers of training in explicit instruction, that general educators do not have the time to acquire and hone, given the number of students and amount of subject matter they must work with every day. Emma has a great deal of respect for her general education colleagues' ability to integrate her students into the general education curriculum, but sees they lack a depth of training necessary for special education. She thinks special educators may become consultants only, with a primary responsibility for paperwork. She fears this will be harmful to students as she sees a continued need to have highly trained teachers on site to provide the intensive intervention students with disabilities benefit from.

I still think that kids that have processing problems are not going to get their needs met without a person that's highly trained to work with them. And I don't think regular classroom teachers with everything that they have to be trained in to do, from gifted all the way... I just don't think they're going to be able to do it. (P2, I3B, p.3)

Although Emma believes teachers who possess exceptional skills will always be needed to instruct students with extraordinary learning disabilities, she does not think they must be called special educators.

Emma does not necessarily believe students should require a special education label to get the help they need. She commented that there are a number of resources available to students at HES, such as Title 1, ESOL, and special education. Due to restrictions on the implementation of services from various funding sources, providing support is less flexible than it might be. She suggested that resources should be looked at as one versatile pool from which the necessary aid could be extracted.

Emma believes you do what you can to help the children. Emma is comfortable requesting aid from and coordinating services with outside agencies to best serve the students and their families. She routinely supervises interns and practicum students because it puts more teachers into the classroom for her students, allowing more direct instruction to be accomplished. "It's nice to have another person in the classroom because it helps to provide more three tier instruction. You can break it up into groups. It's not altruistic motivation. (laughter) I do it because it helps my students" (P2, I2B, p.11). Despite Emma's comment that she has no altruistic motivation, the work she does to enhance her own expertise and to provide training to faculty suggests that she may well have an interest in developing competent new special educators.

Emma was asked what she values about teaching special education. She said it is fun! She values the opportunity to observe changes in children as they learn to read.

You get to teach children how to read. I mean that's so much fun because they come in and they're fragile. They are distrustful. They've had people, teachers, who they care about hand them things and have expected them to be able to do it and they can't. So they come in fragile. It's a lot of fun to teach them how to read and get them to be confident in their reading. That's what I like. (P2, I1, p. 3)

Emma finds work as a special educator fascinating. She enjoys the detective work involved in determining causes of a student's learning difficulties and working through possible resolutions.

Emma voiced support for policies that have moved special education toward being a part of, rather than an appendage to, the school. She appreciates the implementation of multi-tiered systems of support and increased accountability for this reason. She recognizes that what happens in special education is woven into the fabric of the school. Changes that occurred to ease her access to assessment data were also helpful to the ESOL teachers. When she develops schedules for herself and for the paraprofessionals she is attuned to the concerns of classroom, special area, and other resource teachers.

Emma also recognizes the importance of developing a connection between the home and school. She regularly communicates with parents regarding their children through both formal and informal means. She tries to stimulate positive interactions between parents and children around school work and participates with other faculty in activities designed to involve parents in their children's reading. Emma also noted that the school has satellite homework help and tutoring centers available to students in their neighborhoods, making it easier for parents to allow their children to attend.

### **Subjective Norm**

Emma was asked to relate others' expectations of her. She completed a log of school activities for two days. The log included space to identify pressures she felt when doing various tasks throughout her school day.

According to Emma, the intent of the administration, faculty, and staff is "any child that needs help, we pretty much make sure that they get that help within school or

after school” (P2, I1, p.10). Emma indicated that at HES the norm for students is to participate in some sort of specialized program whether it is ESOL, Title 1, gifted, special education, or after school tutoring. In fact she said that students who are not identified as needing one of these special curricular programs are targeted for volunteer run programs and events so that they will feel they get something special as well. Having this culture of movement within the mainstream of the school influences how Emma views inclusion. The removal of her students from their general education classes for part of their instructional day, does not signify a difference from the majority of the population of the school, rather it is inclusive. Emma is careful not to schedule her students into her resource class during their art, music, or physical education classes, because she does not want them to miss out on the experiences common to other students. However, if her students are also served by Title 1 they may join students without disabilities in small group instruction scheduled during those special area class times. Emma accepts that as being part of the prevailing student experience.

At Harding Elementary School using data is standard in instructional decision-making. Emma relates that every six to nine weeks grade level teachers meet with leadership personnel to discuss student progress using assessment data. At those times instructional groupings for Tier 2, Tier 3, and Title 1 may be made. At HES the general education teachers carry out most required testing of students including probes used for monitoring the progress of early intervening services. Teachers routinely enter assessment results onto online documents that are shared among teachers and administrators.

For Emma, the school's embrace of progress monitoring through data collection was welcome, and having ready access to these data has been a tremendous time saver. She indicated that throughout her career she has conducted annual individual assessments with her students, and has sought classroom assessment data from other teachers. Emma administers weekly curriculum based skill checks to inform her following week's lesson planning, and probes to assess progress toward IEP objectives. With her co-teacher, she uses trend data to adjust interventions and grouping for all students in their shared fourth grade class.

When we looked at our benchmarks the lower kids, which of course makes sense, their graphs are shooting up. The middle kids are shooting up slower, but that's okay because they're higher so you wouldn't see that big jump, because then they would be jumping up to eighth grade reading level, which is not... But the gifted kids, we didn't see the graph go up. I felt the gifted kids needed more time so that they could get more in depth with their learning. (P.2, I2B, p. 7)

Emma values the use of data for instructional decision making. She views increased accountability, holding students with disabilities to the same academic standards as students in general population, as positive. She suggests this has helped include special education in the school's conversation about how to help all students be more successful.

ESE is no longer seen as separate. They are seen as part of and I think that's a good thing. The numbers have been reduced in ESE, but also to provide the three tier instruction, the class size that I see is a lot smaller. It puts the kids back into the regular classroom for more time which for some students is good and for some students you know it's not as good. There are some students that I think if I could work with them they would be better off in math even though I'm putting aide support in and everything. I mean I just know that if I was working with them they would be a little bit better off. But I think we're doing a good job in general, meeting the needs we can with the funding we have. (P2, I3B, p. 2)

Although the number of tested students with disabilities at HES is too few to be reported as a subgroup Emma said she analyzes the performance of her students. However, Emma dislikes the high stakes attached to statewide testing. She fears we are “creating a generation of anxiety ridden people” (P, I3B, p. 2), damaging students’ emotional well-being by attaching so many consequences to performance on an annual test.

When asked to discuss her co-teacher’s expectations of her, Emma indicated that they have changed over the years. Because they have co-taught before, the change involves familiarity with one another’s teaching style and their ability to communicate more efficiently. In the past Emma and her partner would email or talk in great detail through changes they might make to lesson plans. Now, “We can just, I don’t know, talk in code. We can get things done more efficiently. When you co-teach with someone and you become close, you can almost read each other’s minds. It just sort of flows very easily” (P2, I2B, p.6). Emma indicated it was not a change in the level of trust, she feels the two trusted that co-teaching would work well from the outset.

Emma indicated that other teachers in the school see her as a resource to them. She noted that many teachers indicate they would like to co-teach or have her provide support within the classroom. Over the years Emma has partnered with several different teachers, but because she is only one person, she must confine her co-teaching to the grade level(s) with the most students needing special education. Emma believes other teachers see her as accessible to them and concerned about their needs as teachers.

General educators have also indicated to Emma that they would like more support in mathematics instruction for their students with special education needs.

Emma provides consultation services, schedules paraprofessionals into classrooms during mathematics instruction, and provides training to paraprofessionals; nonetheless she does not have time in her day to teach mathematics using alternate curriculum and methods. "I'm only one person and I can't be two places at one time" (P2,I2B, p.5).

When Emma provides alternative or modified curricula, materials, or strategies, she expects teachers to adopt the practice and checks in to see that they do. She is mild mannered and good humored, but makes her expectations clear. According to Emma, her colleagues are aware of her expectations for follow through.

With consultation I never really thought of myself that way but I remember what a second grade teacher said. She was describing consult to another teacher and I was there. She said "she gives you ideas but she's sort of like the sergeant of arms because she makes sure that you do what you're supposed to be doing in the classroom". (laughter) I never thought of myself that way but maybe they do perceive me a little bit like that. (P2, I2B, p.13)

Emma believes the principal expects her to do what she is doing. This is the principal's second year at the school and Emma is impressed with how quickly the principal has come to know the students and faculty well. Emma appreciates that the principal asks her opinions and feels they work collaboratively. Nevertheless, the principal recognizes Emma's knowledge of her students and relies on her to develop her schedule and the paraprofessionals' schedules to maximize the service to students.

Emma has maintained a good working relationship with the district special education office over the years. She values the input she has received from several of the staff and feels she can speak openly about district directives. For instance, when the district wanted a specific assessment administered three times per year, Emma spoke up to say that the instrument was not sensitive enough to show growth with that frequency. She administers it annually. Emma remembers when the district special

education department held regularly scheduled district-wide meetings for teachers. She indicated the discontinuation of the meetings coincided with the use of staffing specialists to convey information to the schools. Emma noted that she misses the sense of community and support these meetings used to provide.

### **Perceived Behavioral Control**

When Emma completed her log of activities for two days she indicated that she had a great deal of control over most of her activities. She shared control with others for IEP meetings, administering assessments in the co-teach classroom, and bus duty. She indicated she does not usually feel pressure about her work. "I don't usually stress. It's because I laugh a lot" (P2, I2A, p. 5). She wrote that in the mornings she felt rushed when she had to make changes to schedules due to an injury and absences of one paraprofessional. Often however, she identified feeling efficient, content, happy, and relaxed throughout her day.

An area in which Emma feels she has control is with curriculum. Although the district has provided core curriculum for reading and Emma utilizes it, she feels free to use alternate or additional curricula that best meets student needs. The principal and CRT are familiar with her materials, training, and experience so allow her that flexibility.

Although Emma did not identify many barriers to her ability to enact her role as she feels would be best, some aspects of her context interfered with her work. The time constraints surrounding core subject instructional blocks, i.e., students may not be taken out of the 90 minute reading block, have an impact on Emma's development of her own schedule and that of the special education paraprofessionals. She recognizes the value of assuring all students uninterrupted instructional time, but finds that working around the myriad requirements hinders her ability to see maximum numbers of students for

optimal amounts of time. In the past she was able to instruct students within the general education classroom for 45 of the 90 minutes of reading time, but current rules prohibit this.

An area that Emma feels she has little control over is the allocation of special education staff to the school. Two years ago two full time SETs were assigned to HES, therefore more co-teaching and math intervention was available. Enrollment of fewer students with disabilities precipitated Emma's solitary assignment to HES. Being the only SET limits the instruction and support that students with special education needs can receive. She is grateful for the allocation of three paraprofessional staff. "I do really appreciate the fact that we were given so many aides" (P2, I2B, p. 9). Emma is clear that although she does as much as she can to teach reading and writing, and to support students and teachers in math through the use of paraprofessionals, one teacher cannot meet all of the needs. "The hard thing with me, the pressure I guess that I feel, is I don't feel with one ESE teacher here that I can meet the needs in all three subjects, in all six grades" (P2, I2B, p. 9).

Emma believes that use of response to intervention in determining eligibility for special education due to specific learning disabilities and language impairments has influenced the decline in numbers. She also feels that use of peer comparison data in the Rtl model makes it more difficult to identify students who are both gifted and have specific learning disabilities. Many of these twice exceptional students present with adequate academic scores that may mask disabilities.

In Emma's view, the nearly two years it may take for students to progress through the Rtl process can be a barrier to her ability to promote student academic

success. She understands there were valid concerns about students being over identified as having specific learning disabilities and supports the use of early intervening services. “I think there was a period of time where ESE became a dumping ground” (P2, I3B, p. 1). However she worries that identification of language impairments and SLD will be delayed until students reach intermediate grades, potentially causing them greater difficulty. When she begins providing services for students later in their school career it is harder to get them caught up.

One of our fifth grade students who just got in the program, maybe three weeks ago, he’s one of the students who I think got overlooked. He can read at about a third grade level fairly fluently but his comprehension is very, very weak and he just got into language [services]. I think it’s really hard for kindergarten and first grade teachers to identify when a student has a language problem, especially now. It’s not a federal or state rule but our county says you have to do RTI in order to get them placed into language [services] and I think fewer kids are getting placed into language [services] now. So I feel sorry for this little boy because I think if he had had speech and language services when he was in kindergarten, first, maybe second grade, he wouldn’t have had these significant comprehension problems. (P2, I2A, p. 12)

Emma went on to say, “I think he’s someone that that rule hurt” (P2, I2A, p. 13). She was concerned that primary classroom teachers do not have the expertise to identify language disorders, yet students are not evaluated by a speech-language pathologist until an academic intervention has been attempted. She predicted “I’m afraid I’m going to see more people like him” (P2, I2A, p. 13).

The proximity of Emma’s classroom to her youngest students, making their walk to her more efficient, also poses a barrier to Emma’s accessibility to teachers. Teachers used to stop in regularly when her classroom was more conveniently situated within the main school building. Now they seldom walk out to talk with her at the back of the school in the middle of the playground. In fact, she even packs up all of her

materials to convene IEP meetings in a more central location. Emma has given thought to the effects of her classroom placement and concluded that although this current placement is less convenient for teachers, she does not think it is problematic for students.

I was concerned that being the only SET would be lonely for Emma. I sensed that she had enjoyed having another special educator in the school with whom she could work. I asked if she had people at school that she could talk with about special education issues and if there were people who were resources for her. Emma indicated that two of the part time special education staff were long time friends of hers with whom she talked frequently. She indicated that many of the faculty and support team members could be relied on to offer her support as well. Her husband has also had a career as a special educator and they talk about their work.

### **How Emma Enacts Her Role**

Emma was asked to identify her top priorities when thinking about how to enact her role as a SET. She indicated that scheduling is her first priority because it determines her student groupings. Her next consideration is curriculum.

Emma thinks first of the needs of the students when developing her schedule. She begins the process at the end of each school year. She compiles end of year IEP, curriculum, and assessment data. She then conducts planning meetings with team leaders, to garner their input and to assure their buy-in for the resultant schedule. "I like to include teachers in the ESE scheduling process because I think if they feel like they're a part of it then they're more understanding" (P.2, I1, p.4). She recognizes that teachers need to know their opinions matter to her but also need to see the reality of her situation. She meets with the principal and CRT to have input into the school's master

schedule for the following year. At the beginning of each year she then develops her specific schedule based on the students' IEPs and the school's master schedule. She develops options for the paraprofessionals' schedule and consults with the principal before finalizing her recommendations.

Emma named curriculum as her next priority. She looks at assessment data and her notes from the prior year to determine what curriculum she will begin with for any given student. These decisions are influenced by the schedule. Those students for whom she provides a resource "double dose" of reading are likely to utilize an alternative to the core reading curriculum used in the general education classroom. Those students in a co-taught class may be instructed using a combination of the core and supplemental curricula. Students pulled from science will be taught reading skills and science content. Emma is deliberate in her orchestration of schedule, curriculum, and personnel.

Emma's schedule allowed her little planning time while students were at school. She usually had only 15 minutes before 8:00 and another 15 minutes when she ate lunch at her desk. "But I do that to myself because I'm the one that makes the ESE schedule, especially when you are one ESE teacher trying to get all their needs met within the blocks of time that you're allowed" (P2, I2B, p.5). On the day I observed, she had an extra half hour of planning time because fifth graders were taking an assessment required by the district. It is essential to Emma that she spends as much time as possible with students during the day. On the two days she logged, Emma was at school until 6:00 and 7:00 pm. Although one day she tutored from 3:00 to 4:00 pm, these late afternoons were spent catching up on paperwork for IEPs and progress

reports, leaving her feeling tired. Emma reported that leaving school this late was not uncommon for her, and kept her from taking work home.

When I visited Emma's classroom, I experienced a feeling of content from all who were present. Students who came and went knew their routines, were supported in their tasks, and seemed comfortable with having a visitor present. There was a flow to the activity, Emma easily providing explicit instruction to one small group or individual, then another, allowing time for guided or independent practice. At midday, Emma rearranged furniture to set up a workspace designed specifically for a particularly involved student who requires one-to-one supervision. A paraprofessional came in to eat her lunch and laid out materials for that student. When the student arrived Emma greeted him and went over his visual schedule with him. Then the paraprofessional worked on mathematics with him following a specialized behavior reinforcement schedule. I saw other evidence of individualized instruction and reinforcement systems tailored to individual students. For instance, two first graders received stickers as rewards, whereas a fifth grader earned points.

The time spent in the fourth grade class where Emma co-teaches flowed easily as well. When we first walked in the teacher was instructing the whole class. Emma arranged materials then taught a small reading group while her partner taught another. Later they both addressed the whole class regarding the upcoming writing assignment. Again each teacher worked with a small group, but this time the groups were divided by the task each student needed assistance with. Emma had previously reviewed the work and written notes on each student's project to indicate what they needed to work on this

day, thus which group they would be in. Students were engaged and cheerful as they put real effort into their work.

For many years Emma has been a resource to faculty regarding student behavior. She has worked closely with the behavior resource teachers to develop individualized behavior programs and has trained faculty to implement them. Whenever there is a student in need of a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) or plan, she works with, and actually trained, the current BRT.

Scheduling IEP meetings is not one of Emma's duties. School personnel attempt to accommodate parent schedules but Emma prefers to have IEP meetings scheduled after students leave for the day. If IEP meetings are scheduled before school or during the instructional day, classrooms are supervised by leadership team members (principal, CRT, BRT). Emma indicated it is generally easier for her to leave her students than for a general education classroom teacher to do so because Emma usually has interns or paraprofessionals who can carry out instruction in her absence.

When asked to reflect on her roles at HES Emma said, "I do a little bit of everything" (P2, I1, p. 3). She identified her main role as a teacher. She also consults with students and teachers, and is a resource for the administration and support team when they have questions, "so I'm a teacher, but I'm also a consultant" (P2, I1, p.3). For Emma, becoming a special educator was a life choice, not just a career choice. It was a choice to live a life of service to the community and to develop the expertise to teach children with exceptional needs. She recounted a conversation she once had with a principal. Emma was struggling with the many conflicting duties vying for her attention and couldn't decide on the right course of action. The principal asked her what

was the best thing for the child. That question simplified things for Emma. If you just think “What is the best thing for the child, you can always find the answer if you go that way” (P2, I3B, p 6).

### **Profile of Karen Phelps**

*“We are their last hope in elementary education. . . . We have to teach them and we have to be fast at it” (P3, I1, p. 32)*

Fifty-two year old Karen Phelps has been a special education teacher for 30 years. She had planned to become a pharmacist, but when in college decided it “wasn’t for her.” Her uncle told her about a new field called special education. Although training to work in an “up and coming” field appealed to her, Karen’s undergraduate program focused on institutionalized individuals with cognitive impairments, which was not the work she wanted to do. She returned to a graduate program that taught her to be a teacher of school age students with specific learning disabilities and emotional disabilities.

### **Karen’s Context**

Thomas Paine Elementary School (TPES) was built 20 years ago in a suburban middle class neighborhood. Nearly eight years ago district rezoning increased the percentage of low income students attending. Karen has taught at TPES for 13 years, returning to the classroom after 3 years working in the district special education office. Changes in the composition of the administrative position prompted Karen’s move. Karen has been certified in special education (MR, SLD, EH for K-12) since graduating from college, however at the end of last school year, without warning, she was required to pass a test to become certified to teach elementary education. Karen’s special education certification areas alone did not enable her to be considered a highly qualified

teacher under state and national policy because she taught the core subject areas reading and math. Karen passed the test, although she found it difficult, and became dually certified in special and elementary education.

Thomas Paine Elementary School was the largest of the three schools engaged in this study with an enrollment of 645 students. As with all of the elementary schools in the district, TPES utilized a multi-tiered system of both academic and behavioral supports for students. Although there was a plan in place to utilize Response to Intervention (RtI) to identify students needing special education services, at this school SETs were not identified as part of the RtI leadership team or the early intervening process. Title 1 teachers provided early intervention support in reading and math, and along with the guidance counselor helped classroom teachers develop interventions. Karen's involvement in the eligibility determination function of RtI began after student evaluation once a student was found eligible to receive special education. Once a student was staffed into a special education program, Title 1 services stopped.

### **Special Education at Thomas Paine Elementary**

The percentage of students with disabilities at TPES was 15%, similar to that of MES. A range of special education models of instructional delivery at TPES allowed for flexibility in programming for students. Located within TPES were the district's elementary level program for students who were deaf and hard of hearing, two self contained classrooms for students with varying exceptionalities, two resource SETs, and one pre-kindergarten special education classroom. The school included on their special education team two enrichment teachers who provided a pull out program for students who were gifted. (In the State of Florida, programs for students who are gifted fall under the special education umbrella.)

Karen worked with six other SETs at TPES. A large number of related service providers, interpreters, and paraprofessionals also supported students with special education needs at TPES. Karen was one of two resource teachers that provided pull-out or push-in instruction in math and reading. The resource SETs were responsible for supervising five paraprofessionals, three of whom were assigned to individual students. The paraprofessionals worked in the resource classes with the resource teachers, pushed in to work with students with disabilities in general education classrooms, and supervised students before school and in the lunchroom.

### **Assignment**

This year Karen Phelps was the primary math teacher for most of her fourth and fifth grade students. She was also the primary reading teacher for her fourth grade students. She taught these students at the same time that math or reading was scheduled in their general education classrooms. She used the same curriculum and bore the same requirements as general education teachers for lesson planning and grading these courses. The students in these small classes did not have additional instructional time scheduled during the school day, however some did attend a before school math tutoring program run by the special education and Title 1 resource teachers.

Karen taught a “double dose” reading class to fifth grade students. These students remained with their general education classes for the 90-minute reading block. Four days per week the students went without social studies instruction to attend a 45-minute reading class with Karen at the end of the school day. Karen kept in close contact with the fifth grade reading teacher to assure that they were keeping apace.

The general education curriculum provided approaching level and intervention materials that Karen used.

For many years Karen has been the special education team leader. This year she was the team leader for those special education and related service positions that served in a resource capacity (those who did not have homerooms). As team leader she was responsible for disseminating information from the school leadership and occasionally attending district wide meetings. Karen frequently performed the role of Local Education Agency (LEA) representative in IEP meetings for students of other SETs. Karen also was responsible for developing the schedules for the five paraprofessionals assigned to the resource SETs.

### **Karen Phelps and the Theory of Planned Behavior**

#### **Attitudes about Teaching Special Education**

Karen was asked to relate what it means to her to be a special educator. She responded that being a SET meant she continued to learn new things every day, dealt with constant change, and shouldered a great deal of responsibility. She felt a professional responsibility to excel at her duties and to be a positive representative of the school within the larger community. However, the factor that drove Karen, that most strongly influenced her teaching, was the belief that she was her students' last hope in elementary school. Because her students had not been successful in the general education program, Karen believed that in her special education classroom she had to maximize the instructional time she had with the students.

I've always thought as a SET our responsibility is we are a child's last hope in elementary education. Because they've come from the regular education class [we] have to help these kids become successful. They have finally come to be with us. We have to teach them. We have to teach them at the level that they're at and we have to be fast at it. That's the thing that I see.

We have these meetings with parents that, you know, they're kind of resistant to wanting their child to come into your program and having a label, and being separated, and then once they get in there they want you to just take off as fast as you can and make them normal again. So I feel that's my responsibility. I've got to be very organized and I've got to know my curriculum well, and I've got to make sure that I don't have any kind of behavior issues going on, so that I can give them the optimum because I need to. I feel like, when that report card comes out, I need to show that their child was successful. And if they're not, why is it? And for me, I don't want it to be that I wasn't the responsible one. (P3, I1, pp.32-33)

Although academic success was of utmost importance, Karen recognized the need to manage student behavior so that behavioral issues did not become barriers to student success.

Karen also believed that the needs and behavior of students with disabilities were often misunderstood, colored by the perceptions of teachers, administrators, and others. Karen worried that there are those in the larger community, including policy makers, think students with special needs can simply be assimilated into general education and will not require specialized services. She was concerned that some may want to eliminate special education, but she believes special education will always be needed. There will always be students with special needs, and their disabilities will not necessarily diminish during the course of their lifetimes. There must continue to be services, supports, accommodations, and modifications throughout a student's school years. These students will continue to need advocates and Karen has found she likes standing up for them. She became most passionate when talking about meeting the needs of her students now as fast as possible, and not having those efforts wasted as students went on to middle and high school.

My only fear for special education is I don't want it to go so far where they think that ESE is not needed, because it is needed. I was in a transition meeting this morning for a student that's going to be moving on to the middle school. The teacher said in the meeting we have all these

accommodations, but when you get into middle school most teachers don't do them and so kids fail. I'm sitting in this meeting and saying you've got to be kidding, you know there's a law that says this has to be done. These kids don't just come out of elementary school and they're regular ed. and they're going to be perfectly fine until they graduate from high school. Special ed. is in middle school; special ed. is in high school; special ed. is in college. You get those accommodations. They don't go away; you're not cured. (P3, I3B, pp. 26-27)

### **Subjective Norm**

To uncover Karen's beliefs about the normative expectations of others and social pressures regarding special education teaching, she was asked what others' expectations were of her at TPES. Karen was also asked to complete a log of daily activities for one or more days and to identify pressures she felt when doing various tasks throughout her school day.

Karen indicated that others' expectations of her were different depending upon their roles. Fellow teachers expected her to be flexible, deal with daily changes, teach the students they had in common, manage student behavior, and help them manage student behavior. In some cases she felt general education teachers wanted her to cure or fix the students. Karen felt her colleagues needed her to be a resource, available to them on a daily basis, and they frequently touched base with her as she walked students to and from classes. Karen said her classroom had a revolving door because so many teachers came in and out with questions after school.

Administrators' expectations of Karen likewise included teaching her students and working hard to find ways to meet students' needs, but were broader. Karen was expected to give students needing special education access to the general education curriculum, and like her general education colleagues, she was required to assign grades. An issue that arose for Karen was how to grade the students in her "double

dose” reading class. She was required to give these students a grade on their report card separate from the reading grade issued by the general education teacher, even though the students were shared.

Karen was required to participate in professional learning communities, book studies, and lesson studies alongside general education colleagues. As with all teachers she served on a school improvement committee, in her case parent involvement. Karen felt pressure to be in meetings all the time, yet to get the paperwork done and done thoroughly. She was also expected to deal with constant and year-to-year change.

This is 13 years of constant change. I never have the same group, the same make up, the same grade levels. I mean every year it is different. Every year I feel like I have a new job because I truly have to get new curriculum. I may wait a few years and then come back to a certain grade level, but it’s been different every single year. Our people change every year, too; there’s a lot of turnover. When we’ve done co-teaching and inclusion, I mean you’re constantly working with new people. (P3, I3Bp. 8)

Karen reflected on her administrator’s expectations through repeated mention of being evaluated on her teacher appraisal. She appreciated the clarity of expectations and the regular feedback on lesson plans and observations she received from her principal. Administrative evaluation was one of three components of a value added model for teacher evaluation the district was implementing for the first time. Karen was mindful that her performance was being closely monitored and influenced, not only with regard to her appraisal, but also the evaluation of her principal. Karen wanted her work to reflect well on her principal, understanding that the school district’s expectations were for her work to be in compliance with special education rules. Karen indicated she did not want to embarrass the district through non-compliance with state and federal regulations.

Karen expressed sensitivity to parent's concerns as well as a frustration that as students got older, parent involvement in the educational process seemed to lessen. Karen's perception of parents' expectations was that she would make great change in their children happen quickly.

Some parents, when they come into our program, immediately want change; want to see growth. Things have been bad for a long time, and then you're going to put a label on their child, and so they want to see results, and they want to see them fast. So yes, I do feel lots of pressure from parents. (P3, I2E, pp.2-3)

Karen pointed out that her students had expectations, too. They expected her to teach them what they needed to know. Karen expressed awareness that if students felt they were not getting taught they could bring that to the attention of their parents. She did not want her students to need that contingency.

Much of the pressure Karen identified on her activity log revolved around having adequate instructional time to meet her students' needs. She wanted to make sure that she taught all of the concepts students needed to master in a way that all of the students could comprehend. She worried over losing instructional time for students who missed class for various reasons, and whether students would have adequate time to master skills and learn the curriculum. Karen was keenly aware that a large component of her teacher appraisal was based on student achievement data. In Karen's case she was fairly certain that her student growth score would be derived from the statewide high stakes assessment performance of the fourth and fifth grade students she taught.

Karen noted feeling pressure to see behavioral change for students on individual behavioral plans. She felt pressed to stay informed about what happened in her students' general education settings and to keep paraprofessionals up-to-date on any new developments with students. She felt a responsibility to know her students well

and believed that her experience as a SET gave her an ability to understand her students in a way that was different from general educators.

On her activity log Karen noted that she felt happy when she was delivering instruction. When asked about that she replied, "It is true I don't feel stressed when I'm teaching. As a special ed. teacher you want to teach. That's what your job is." (P3, I 2C, p. 3).

### **Perceived Behavioral Control**

**Facilitators.** There were a number of factors that Karen could identify as assisting her in performing her role of SET. Karen regards herself as a problem solver. Although she had not considered prior to these interviews whether that personal trait led to becoming a SET, she did see that trait as instrumental in her work. Much of her lesson planning, scheduling, behavioral programming were steeped in "figuring it out" and "making it work."

Karen felt that within the culture of the school SETs were respected by their colleagues. General education teachers asked for assistance and insights from SETs, listened to what SETs had to say, and were willing to learn from them. General education teachers routinely collaborated with special educators regarding students and curriculum.

I mean we're really respected here. I can really say that here at Paine. The regular ed teachers really respect what we do. They see the importance. They come to us all the time. They don't brush us off or blow us off. I mean they want our input. They want our help and so you know that's a big role. That's a lot of shoes big shoes to fill. (P3, I2D, p. 15)

Certain members of the school staff were particularly helpful in supporting Karen's work as a SET. The guidance counselor was knowledgeable about special education, acted as liaison to the district special education department, and

communicated very well with parents, students, and teachers. The Title 1 teachers provided professional development opportunities and teaching materials. They also provided Tier 2 academic interventions to students who might later be identified as needing special education services. The principal modeled respect for the SETs. She listened to their input regarding how to structure the special education program at the school (i.e., reinstating pull out math classes). She came up with a way to make the special education team leader task more workable. The principal supported Karen's decision to deviate somewhat from the district pacing guides to adjust teaching time for her students. The principal also supported Karen in obtaining materials from the district.

Karen felt that the control she had over her work was enhanced by the presence of a school wide system of positive behavioral supports for her students. All members of the school community operated within the system so Karen felt there was school wide understanding of behavioral expectations, reinforcement for student compliance, and follow up for behavioral infractions. Karen had a significant role in managing individual Tier 3 behavior plans for a number of her students. Schoolwide understanding of PBS meant that Karen's efforts at behavioral intervention were supported, which allowed her to focus more fully on teaching academic content and strategies.

**Barriers.** Time was a factor that was much on Karen's mind and there never seemed to be enough of it. District developed pacing guides dictated a timeline for teaching the general education curriculum, yet Karen felt strongly that her students needed extra time to master concepts and skills that their general education classmates could learn more rapidly. The State and the district mandated an extensive schedule of student assessments. Many students were allowed the accommodation of extra time

when tested, but that ultimately took away from instructional time. Karen believed that it was important for her students to be included in field trips and other special programs and opportunities with their peers, but recognized that these things also usurped instructional time.

Time in the school day was insufficient for lesson planning. Karen indicated she planned best when she had a block of quiet time to lay everything out and write her plans for the week. She stated she spent a good six-hour block of time on this each weekend. She had tried working on her plans in the evenings, but found that having a block of time to look over everything ultimately worked best for her. Part of the difficulty in doing her planning at school was the lack of uninterrupted time. At school most afternoons were taken up with IEP meetings or professional development, and on days when there were no meetings scheduled, teachers frequently came by to discuss students, curriculum, or other matters. Karen valued the communication and collaboration, but simply had no time for both. Karen had two short planning periods scheduled within her day, and she used these to set up materials, talk with paraprofessionals, and adjust lesson plans to the day's unanticipated variations (i.e., absences, students needs for remediation). Karen also did much of her IEP related paperwork at home.

From beginning to end it's like a six hour ordeal to sit down to do planning for a week, and that may not even be everything. I know many, many, many Saturdays or Sundays, from start to finish, it's been a good six hours, and that's spreading all the books out, looking at all the websites, looking in the books and going through everything myself. (P3, I2D, pp. 7-8)

Given that there were so many demands on her time, Karen felt that the utilization of the time she did have with students was something she could control. Although she did not have a choice in which core curriculum she used, she was able to

choose supplemental materials she felt would benefit her students. Maximizing effective instructional time was a priority; thus she planned her lessons and set up her classroom, in-class schedule, and materials for efficiency. I observed Karen using her scheduled planning time to review written lesson plans and gather needed materials so that all of the time with students was teaching time.

It is my preparation time to get it out, so that I don't waste any of their time, because their time is so limited with me. You saw today they have to go back early because they have to go to lunch, or there's not time built in for transition, so I have to make sure that I have all the time that I need to be able to teach what I need to teach. Plus, it eliminates behavior problems when you have everything set out. (P3, I2D, pp. 7-8)

On the day of the observation, no instructional time was spent dealing with students' misbehavior. Students were efficiently rewarded with tickets or checks on token cards for on-task behavior using the systems in place. A student who earned a reward picked it up from a tub on her way out of class with a big grin but no disruption to the rest of the class. During reading class one student seemed sleepy, unfocused, so Karen gave him a task that required him to stand up and move. She explained to him that moving could help him refocus. The only outside interruption during instructional time was an adult stepping in to ask if the class would be using the computer lab for testing later in the day.

Karen viewed professional development opportunities through district Title 1 and general education curriculum departments as factors that helped her do her job. Karen keenly felt the weight of accountability for providing the primary instruction in core subjects and attended any training available to the general education teachers. Through these she learned about curriculum and strategies for teaching that were particularly useful to giving her students access to the general education curriculum and

standards. At the same time Karen lamented the lack of training offered by the special education department. She regretted that the increased use of only online training reduced opportunities for her to interact in a learning environment with other SETs. Karen found herself providing informal training and mentoring for newer SETs to the school. Karen believed the dearth of training overall reduced special education from being on “the cutting edge” of education as it once had been.

### **How Karen Enacts Her Role**

Karen saw herself as both a general education teacher and a special education teacher. In fact she said it was like having two jobs. She indicated she had the same responsibilities as a general educator: teaching her students the general education curriculum, lesson planning, participating on committees and in professional development, and being evaluated through the same teacher appraisal process. She truly felt included as part of the faculty and appreciated this as different from her early days as a SET. However, her special education responsibilities compounded and intensified her job.

Karen valued focusing on the unique nature of the needs of each student, a tenet of special education. Nevertheless, individual educational planning and meetings added to Karen’s tasks and time commitments. Her belief that she was her students’ last hope increased feelings of accountability for her students’ academic advancement and behavioral improvement. Her planning, teaching, and interactions with colleagues could be characterized as problem solving and advocacy. She put a great deal of effort into understanding the curriculum and thinking through potential difficulties her students would have with understanding it so that she could find alternative methods for teaching them. She consulted and collaborated with general educators multiple times every day.

Each of the three interviews was stopped at least once so that Karen could assist a colleague. One interview took place right after school and that interview was interrupted five times. On the day of the observation Karen spoke professionally with colleagues about student issues each time she walked to and from her classroom with students.

As SETs, we have so much responsibility. It's incredible now how much we have to do. And when you're a SET, at least in the role that I am in at this school, I'm not only doing a regular ed teacher's job, but I'm doing a SETs job, also. And you know that comes with a lot of paperwork, comes with a lot of knowing people and having to get in and out of the different grade levels, and trying to find the time to get in and out and talk with everybody within one day. But then I've got to make sure I've got my regular ed side going too. Those lesson plans have got to be done each day. I have to know what the curriculum is, make sure homework is there, and all those things are in place. So it's really evolved into a big thing. It's a big snowball now." (P3 I1, pp. 8-9)

Through Karen's 30 years as a SET she has seen changes in the delivery of and acceptance for special education services. Still she worries about the future of special education and realizes a continued need for advocacy. In Karen's words, "special education kind of consumes you."

Annie, Emma, and Karen have much in common yet their work lives diverge. These similarities and differences are explored through a cross case analysis in chapter 5. Chapter 6 presents conclusions, implications, and recommendations.

## CHAPTER 5 CROSS CASE ANALYSIS

This multiple case study investigated the role of special education teachers in elementary schools that utilized a multi-tiered system of supports approach for educating students. Annie McNamara, Emma Kelley, and Karen Phelps, profiled in Chapter 4, worked at different sites within one school district, and thus were required to negotiate the same district wide policies and mandates, but in different school contexts.

The cross case analysis presented in this chapter provides findings that inform an understanding of what it means for a SET to work in a multi-tiered context. The findings illustrated in Table 5.1 are presented as themes and subthemes. Themes that address how SETs think about their roles are presented within the framework of the Theory of Planned Behavior, and are followed by themes addressing how SETs enact their roles. Chapter 5 is rounded out by a discussion of the findings as they relate to dimensions of the role of the special educator discussed in the Chapter 2 review of policy and practice.

### **Being a Special Educator in a Multi-tiered Context**

The findings in this study suggest that SETs possess an inner motivation to do well at this job that they see as service oriented and containing opportunities for personal growth. They are committed to the profession and to the learner, seeing a continued need to advocate for both. These SETs are conscious of time, feeling an urgency to maximize it. They recognized the necessity of adapting to their contexts and make personal choices to control what they can. When these SETs talked about how they enact their roles, despite challenges they faced, they emerged as problem-solvers, collaborators, and leaders.

Each of these SET's roles has been influenced by the advent of MTSS in academic and behavioral areas. Both Milton and Thomas Paine elementary schools have implemented a schoolwide system of positive behavior supports (PBS) and Annie and Karen are involved in the full range of tiered behavioral interventions. Although Emma did not indicate that Harding Elementary subscribed to a schoolwide PBS framework, there were leveled behavioral supports in place and Emma had been a pioneer at the school in providing individualized behavior programs.

Annie and Emma reported being involved in the Rtl training provided by the district. Emma was part of a school based team trained in the implementation of Rtl tiered supports, ongoing progress monitoring, and the process for its use in the identification of learning disabilities and language impairments. For one year she was very involved with training the Harding Elementary School faculty. Annie remains on the schoolwide Rtl leadership team at Milton Elementary School.

Annie and Emma design and implement early intervening services to students who are at risk for learning difficulties in grades K-5. At times they serve as the interventionist, directly instructing students within the co-taught classroom. At times they design interventions that others implement. These interventions provide data that may be used as part of an evaluation conducted to determine eligibility for special education services. Karen does not participate in early intervening services. She becomes involved in the Rtl process only when the evaluation has been completed and if the student is eligible for her services.

Evaluation data, including data resulting from interventions, informs the development of students' IEPs at each school, and subsequently the instruction

provided by Karen, Emma, or Annie. Academic instruction delivered in the resource room is considered a tier 2 or tier 3 intervention at Thomas Paine and Harding Elementary schools. At Milton Elementary Tier 3 instruction occurs within the context of the general education classroom. It is provided by SETs, paraprofessionals, or general education teachers in addition to core instruction.

Each of these SETs ascribes a decline in special education enrollment to use of the RtI process. These lower enrollments might be a result of reducing what is perceived as over identification of SLD in the past. Emma noted, “It’s sad that it just seems to take so long now to get people that need help in the program. I know that the pendulum swings and I guess that too many kids were being identified or perhaps misidentified,” (P2, I3A, p.11-12). However, Annie suspects that some teachers may avoid pursuit of identification because of the commodious process. She portrayed the thoughts of some general education teachers, “I’m not doing that kid. Let’s just not identify the child as a student with a disability. We’ll just keep plugging along because it is more work to figure out how a kid learns and provide an intervention,” (p1, I3, p.1).

Emma has noticed fewer young children entering her ESE program and voiced concern that students may not be identified in primary grades because their responses to some interventions may mask the presence of disabilities, or distract educators from looking further. Later identification also delays remediation. Emma expressed her concerns, “We have kids that spend two years going through this process, and if I get them later it’s harder to get them caught up,” (P2, I3A, p. 11). Whatever the reason for the decline in enrollment, it has been accompanied by a decreased allocation of SETs to two of these schools.

The decrease from two teachers to one full time SET has resulted in a sea change of service provision at Harding Elementary School. Most notably, math instruction is rarely delivered by the special education teacher. Emma, the lone SET, focuses on reading instruction, most of that in a resource room setting. For mathematics, she schedules paraprofessional supports and provides consultation. There has also been a decrease in the number of classrooms where teachers participate in co-teaching. The one classroom in which co-teaching occurs serves 10 students with special education needs.

Just before our second interview Karen was notified that the allocation for resource special educators at Thomas Paine Elementary School would be cut to one for the upcoming year, due to a projected drop in enrollment. She was unsure how that would affect resource special education in the upcoming year as she would have to provide instruction at four more grade levels. Karen spoke about change in the work life of a SET, “This is 13 years of constant change. I never have the same group, the same make up, the same grade levels. I mean every year it is different. Every year I feel like I have a new job” (P3, I3B, p.4). Changes to her context would influence Karen’s role.

### **Influences that Guide the Work of SETs**

The Theory of Planned Behavior was used as a conceptual framework to aid in understanding how SETs think about and do their work. The TPB assumes that behavior is dependent upon salient beliefs about the behavior, but is also informed by the evaluation of resources and opportunities that make performing a behavior a realistic goal (Ajzen, 1991). Findings that address the ways SETs think about their work are presented within an organizing framework based on the constructs of the TPB. The

findings that reflect the work that SETs do are presented as themes and subthemes of role enactment.

### **Attitudes about Teaching Special Education**

Four themes emerged from the participants' beliefs about teaching special education: (a) inner drive, (b) commitment to the field, (c) learner focus, and (d) time consciousness.

#### **Inner Drive**

Each of the SETs communicated internal qualities and beliefs that led them to special education as a career and that have kept them in their chosen field. Each conveyed enjoyment in teaching and felt least stressed when interacting with their students. Special education was viewed as a means of service to others. Each SET participated in professional development and communicated a sense of personal accountability for her work.

**Service.** Teaching special education contains an element of service to others and the community that fulfills a personal need. In Annie's case she felt there was a spiritual nature to her work, a higher purpose for which she was called. Teaching students who otherwise might be left out, and changing the perceptions of adults who would exclude children with special needs from educational opportunities was more than a job to her.

Another aspect of service in the SET's role was to provide support to general education teachers with special education students in their classes. Providing support might include assistance with planning for differentiated instruction, designing and implementing academic or behavioral interventions, or classroom management.

Another important facet of the SET's role was providing emotional support to

colleagues. Annie considers her co-teachers, “what their needs are and how I can support them, make their jobs easier, and a little less stressful,” (P1, I2, p. 16).

**Lifelong learning.** Each had an interest in being part of a field that provided challenge. Two of the three SETs used the term being on the “cutting edge” to describe an aspect of what they appreciated about working in special education. Karen was first drawn to the field because it was new and exciting, with newly researched methods of teaching that she believed led the field of education. She lamented that she feels the field has recently lost that edge, because the local public school district emphasis in professional development for SETs is now general education.

We used to have trainings just for special education teachers. When I worked in the ESE office a lot of our trainings were for special ed. teachers. Now, I don't remember going to a special ed. training in I can't tell you when. It's all regular ed. training. When I go into trainings it's all regular ed. curriculum. (P3, I1, p. 6)

Annie has maintained connections with the local university, attends professional conferences, and is involved piloting products for use with her students. She feels that this, in addition to mentoring interns, helps keep her aware of what is on the “cutting edge” in the field. Emma did not use this term in our conversations, yet she reported reading special education journals and articles pertaining to best practice and discussed research with me. Each spoke about school based professional development they participate in with their colleagues. However, each pointed out that there are no longer opportunities to gather with special educators from other schools throughout the district.

**Personal accountability.** Each of these SETs indicated they feel a personal responsibility to teach their students. The pressure each felt most piercingly was the worry that they could not do enough to support each of the children on their caseloads. Annie said she gives 110%, but still feels she should do more. Emma conveyed her

concern, “I don’t feel with one ESE teacher here that I can meet the needs.” Karen expressed the belief that she is her students’ last hope, which drove her to be extremely focused in her planning and instruction.

I’ve always thought as a SET our responsibility is we are a child’s last hope in elementary education. Because they’ve come from the regular education class [we] have to help these kids become successful. They have finally come down here with us. We have to teach them. We have to teach them at the level that they’re at and we have to be fast at it. (P3, I1, p. 32)

Added to the SETs personal concern about doing high quality work, each was facing the initial implementation of a value added model (VAM) of teacher evaluation. Only Karen appeared to feel additional pressure from this. Due to the design of the evaluation in this district Annie’s and Emma’s scores would not be based upon the achievement of students they taught, but on the overall performance of their schools. Only Karen, under this model, would be judged based on her own students’ achievement, achievement that was measured by one high stakes test. Karen pointed out that she appreciated the specificity of expectations outlined in the principals’ observation segment of the evaluation. Nevertheless, the awareness that her students’ gain scores would impact her evaluation, the evaluations of others on the faculty, and the overall school score added pressure to Karen’s strong feelings of personal accountability. “Hoping our kids can score above a level 1. That’s a big responsibility to me,” (P3, I1, p. 20).

### **Commitment to the Profession of Special Education**

Each of these SETs demonstrated a commitment to the field of special education. Each continues to see a need for advocacy and to mentor those new to the field.

**Advocating for the role of SETs.** Each of these SETs indicated they have witnessed a change in the acceptance of students with special education needs within

their elementary schools. They each recognized a continued need for advocacy, however. Annie believes that the children have embraced their friends with special needs, but that some adults continue to resist the full inclusion practiced at her school. Karen has real concerns that there are legislators who would like to believe that special education is unnecessary, that students will somehow no longer need specialized instruction, and who will attempt to do away with funding for special education. Emma and Annie also voiced concerns that funding for special education will diminish and availability of services for students will recede. All three strongly voiced a continued need for special education, and special education teachers.

**Mentoring novices.** Each of these SETs has mentored novice teachers and interns. Karen has chosen to focus her mentoring on novice teachers over the past few years. She feels she has needed to provide novice SETs with procedural instruction that was once performed by district office personnel. Annie and Emma continue to train student interns. As Annie put it, “if we truly want to have teachers who are quality educators it’s our responsibility as quality educators to show them our practice” (P1, I1, p.8).

### **Learner Focus**

Each of the SETs maintained that the individual needs of the students were their highest priority when determining how they should enact their roles. Annie’s goal was for students to become “functional members of society and lifelong learners” (P1, I1, p. 1). Each SET was put in a position of having to balance what was best for the individual versus how to meet the demands of the group.

**Children’s needs first.** When discussing their priorities, each SET indicated that the needs of their students with disabilities were the factor that most influenced their

work. Annie pointed out that doing what is best for the child is not necessarily what is easiest for the adult. Emma believes that pursuing what is best for the students ultimately makes decision making easier. These SETs strive to know the students well in order to program for the presenting issues and plan for potential learning difficulties. For instance when Karen spoke about planning lessons she noted, “You have to figure out how they can understand it. That’s what a lot of special education is, figuring out how this child can learn it, (P2, I2F, p. 3).”

**Individual versus group needs.** A tension for these SETs is weighing the needs of the individual against the needs of the group. They work in public elementary schools where general education is the norm and most of the resources serve to align student achievement with general education standards. Although each is concerned with individual student needs, each also carries responsibilities that require them to look at the needs of the larger group. For instance, when developing their own schedules Emma, Karen, or Annie must consider how many students with special education needs are enrolled at various grade levels to determine where they can utilize co-teaching, resource, consultation, or other instructional configurations. When developing schedules for paraprofessionals, they have to consider the schedules of the teachers involved and the needs for student supervision in the cafeteria, before and after school, and during special area classes. They must be cognizant of the allocation of personnel at their schools in planning how to provide the services identified as needed on student IEPs. Emma explained how she negotiated with the faculty.

I like to include classroom teachers in the ESE scheduling process because I think, if they feel like they’re a part of it, then they’re more understanding if you can’t put resources towards one grade. They don’t understand why I

can't push into that reading when there's only one student in there, and why I'm going into another grade and there's 10 in there. (P2, I1, p.4)

She is sensitive to the concerns of the general education teachers. At the same time she demonstrates awareness that limited resources require prioritizing service needs.

But you know as an ESE teacher you have to be very fair, you have to, you can't play favorites with grade levels or with kids. And you really have to look at the whole program and the needs of the whole program because resources are limited. You know it would be great if there was an ESE teacher at every grade level, but there isn't. (P2, I1, p.4)

These SETs noted that they feel more a part of their schools than they did early in their careers, when they felt distinctly separate from their colleagues. Their involvement alongside general education colleagues in school wide and grade level teams, and in professional development activities has served to engender this feeling of belonging. Inclusive practices that have put SETs inside general education classrooms and required special educators to grasp and teach general education curriculum have encouraged this as well. Emma indicated that school accountability had forced administrators to be concerned with all of the lowest performing students, some of whom have special education needs. Looking at all of the schools' students in need is a powerful inclusion practice. In Emma's case this has resulted in the administrator making clear to general education teachers that they are responsible for all of the students assigned to them. Achievement data are reviewed regularly by teams of teachers and administrators to determine which students need placement into interventions within a multi-tiered framework.

## **Time Consciousness**

Each of the SETs struggles with how to manage their time. All agreed that time during the students' school day should maximize student learning. Using student time for instruction was valued over meeting or planning time.

**Maximizing the students' day.** In the opinions of these SETs, time when students were present at school needed to be spent teaching. For this reason, two of the SETs voluntarily chose to limit their planning time during the students' school day to maximize the time they could spend with students. Each manipulated their teaching schedules and the paraprofessionals' time to target students' service needs, adjusting for intensity and frequency. Duration of instructional time was often limited by policy. SETs planned their instruction with precision to make the most of the time they had with students.

**Instructional time versus other duties.** Each of the SETs reported tension between instructional time and (a) assessment, (b) meetings, and (c) paperwork. Assessment was considered valuable as an instructional tool, but all felt that an inordinate amount of school time was spent in an accumulation of formative, summative and high stakes assessments. Ongoing progress monitoring was seen as valuable but the tools and the rigidity with which it was sometimes imposed into the Rtl process could be onerous. End of year testing was seen as having value insomuch as it offered a measure of student achievement. Annie was proud of the accomplishments of ESE students at her school.

As compared to the district and the state, our special ed. students at this school over the last five years have made the most growth. They're one of the top in the state as far as growth in special education. (P1, I1, p.4)

However, the high stakes attached to the statewide assessment and the accompanying ramifications in the lives of students and teachers were resented. Karen noted,

I just spent the past three days doing the Stanford 10 for fifth graders. There were two separate subtests for math and they were all supposed to be done in one day. It being a short day, a Wednesday, there was not enough time for us to do both subtests in one day. My principal said to just stop and then pick back up today, which we needed to do because they were worn out, truly worn out. (P3, I1, p 23)

Much of teachers' time, after students were released from school, was spent in meetings; for IEPs, professional development, and collaborative planning. Time consumed in meetings, as well as the scheduling of IEP meetings was a concern. These SETs preferred to hold IEP meetings after the student school day in order to focus the attention of all participants on the IEP, and to avoid the loss of instructional time when teachers were called from class to participate in the meeting. Each of these SETs believes the IEP meeting is a very important part of the special education of a student, and in the relationship between the school and family. Although they made an effort to accommodate parent schedules, they expressed a desire for the meetings to be held at a time of day when all could focus their attention on the student and parent.

**Not enough time.** Paperwork was held in least esteem and each SET reported doing the majority of their paperwork on their own time, after their contracted day. Each either stayed late at the school building or worked at home. Although the collective bargaining agreement established a minimum of an hour per day for planning, these teachers recognize that collaborative planning, consultations, IEP meetings, and professional development activities consume most of that time. Inevitably the paperwork accompanying those tasks consumes additional amounts of time. The preparation time to research and develop interventions for students with disabilities or for tier 3 early

intervening services can be considerable. Developing intervention plans may require consultation, collaboration, and observation, taking up more of the SETs day. Working out details may also include generating data collection systems that are then utilized with students and may need revision.

### **Summary and Discussion**

A person's behavior is shaped, in part, by their beliefs about the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). The beliefs these SETs voiced about teaching special education indicated a commitment to their profession, commitment to learners, and a very personal concern for the quality of the work they do. Each SET seemed to hold personal convictions that led them to a career that they saw as purposeful and in the service of others. Each enjoyed the challenge of problem solving and was flexible enough to deal with constant change. Each found ways to advocate for their students and to share their talents with the next generation of special educators.

The SETs in this inquiry each struggled with a sense of never having enough time to do all they were expected to do. Each felt compelled to spend the majority of the students' day providing instruction, self-imposing limits on their planning time while students were present at school. Yet, each felt constrained by strict regulations on instructional time. Most collaboration and consultation occurred after student hours, or on the fly throughout the day. SETs were dissatisfied that instructional time was lost to what was considered excessive mandated assessment. Given the SETs challenges concerning instructional time, perhaps it would be sensible to establish a role for SETs limited to providing only Tier 3 intensive, small group intervention. Fuchs (2011) envisioned special educators with a narrowed range of responsibilities and small caseloads. One of the two special educator roles conceived of by Zigmond (2007) was

that of a SET responsible only for intensive specialized instruction. A more circumscribed role might expand instructional time.

The day-to-day activities recounted by Emma, Karen and Annie were similar to those reported in the studies reviewed in chapter 2. Based upon focus group interviews, York-Barr et al. (2005) reported that most teachers' time was spent on direct instruction, collaborating and consulting, with colleagues and paraprofessionals, and preparing materials and instruction. In a study of teachers' time use by Vannest and Hagan-Burke (2010) only 40% of SET's time was spent in instruction, and another 23% of their time was spent in collaborative activities. The reported 5% of time spent in planning seems too little, given complexity of instructional needs. These percentages give rise to the question of how SETs distribute their energy to manage their work-load. In the cases of the SETs in this study, much of the planning and paperwork was completed after hours or at home.

### **Others' Expectations of Special Educators**

What emerged when these teachers were asked about others expectations were two kinds of responses. One theme addressed how others viewed special education teaching and another addressed the SETs' response to those expectations as they perceived a need to advocate for their students.

### **Legitimacy of the Role**

The role of "special education teacher" has been a presence in public elementary schools for over thirty years. As I talked with these teachers it was apparent that special education has become a part of the fabric of these schools, with expectations for the special educator woven into the culture. Others' roles, student, parent, colleague, or administrator, shaped their expectations of the special education teachers.

**Others expect much from me.** Annie talked about her students, kindergarteners and first graders, expecting her to love them, and to give them a new chance every day to perform well. Karen noted that her students expected her to teach them all that they needed to know. She also noted that her fourth and fifth graders would involve their parents if they felt she was not teaching them.

In general, the SETs' view was that parents expected them to carry out their teaching responsibilities and support their children. Annie indicated there was a wide range of parent need and expectation. She noted that some parents wanted advice and support from her, while others hardly were aware of her presence in their child's classroom. Karen's perception was that once students' were identified as needing special education, in many cases parents looked to the special education teacher to immediately accelerate the students' learning. Emma noted that many parents of entering kindergarteners want to know if there is a co-taught kindergarten class. However, SETs noted that parent involvement in IEP and other school based meetings seemed to wane as students got older.

Annie, Karen, and Emma all perceived that the general education teachers with whom they work expect them to be knowledgeable resources, and to share their expertise about special education methods and materials. SETs were expected to be extremely flexible and collegial. General educators considered these special educators as colleagues, fully engaged members of the school faculty, involved in the workings of the school community, and partners in the school's accountability. Co-teaching general educators expected the special educators to share responsibility for planning, teaching,

managing the classroom, and addressing the needs of all of their mutual students.

Karen reflected that

We as teachers talk to each other all the time, regular ed. and special ed. My door is a revolving door. After school I have people coming or going all the time asking me about this or asking me about that, asking about students, asking will this work, will this curriculum work, will that work? (P3, I1, p. 12)

A common theme in administrator's expectations was that each of these SETs was a responsible professional capable of performing their role in a way that met the needs of the special education student population. The administrator's vision of special education service delivery defined their views of special educators' roles within the school. The special education teacher's role was intertwined with instructional configurations. At Milton, the administrator was the driving force behind the inclusive practices. That vision was made real by administrative decision making and garnering support from the district administration for staff allocations and other resources. Making the model work successfully required the work of teachers such as Annie who embraced the vision and became ambassadors. Annie's commitment to inclusion defines her work and, I suspect, plays a part in how much others expect from her to make it work.

At Thomas Paine, there are numerous models of special education service delivery in place; however, one instructional configuration that is not seen is co-teaching. At one time several years ago, the resource SETs co-taught within general education classrooms. In using this model, Karen's experience was that general education environment was not suitable for adequately meeting special education student needs. These students were not successfully achieving reading and mathematics standards. She and the other resource teacher petitioned the

administrator to return to a resource model, allowing them to teach reading and mathematics in a more structured environment to small groups of students needing intensive intervention. Karen indicated that the change had a positive effect on student gains. “They did well, the fourth graders that I had from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. It was just incredible looking at what they had learned,” (P3, I3b, p. 12).

At Harding, inclusion is now institutionalized as all students spend much of their instructional day within general education classrooms. Students needing special education come to the resource room for additional instruction in reading. Emma has a personal mission to maintain co-teaching as part of special education at Harding, and can do so as long as the numbers of students at a given grade level make co-teaching an expedient way to serve students. The administrators and teachers at Harding expect Emma to make it work. They express wishes that she could teach more mathematics, do more co-teaching, and only through repeating the phrase “I am only one person and cannot be everywhere” can Emma manage these expectations. These SETs occasionally feel others want more than they can give and they have had to learn to accept they cannot meet all of the expressed needs of others.

### **Continued Need for Advocacy**

Despite the institutionalization of special education and inclusive practices in these elementary schools, the SETs expressed a continued need for advocacy.

**Changing Perceptions.** Annie, Emma and Karen have each been teaching special education for near 30 years. They have seen change over time in instructional delivery and in acceptance of special education in elementary schools. They noted that although students with disabilities are commonly taught by general education teachers for much of the school day, there continues to be a need to educate general education

teachers about the special needs of these students and how those needs may be met. In the experience of these three SETs, most general educators accept responsibility for students with disabilities, however, there continues to be reluctance on the part of some. Karen perceives that some general education teachers want her to “fix” the students she serves. Annie and Emma also noted a continued need to change perceptions of teachers regarding students. Each indicated that helping teachers better understand the unique nature of a student’s needs and facilitating the relationship between the individual teacher and student assist in changing those perceptions. Karen voiced the need for advocacy, “It’s just that somebody has to stand up for them and I like doing that. I like standing up for these kids. I really do,” (P3, I3b, p.7).

Annie, Karen, and Emma are strong individuals who have a sense of who they are, an inner drive that motivates much of their decision-making. Yet, they are very aware of the social norms and cultures of their school environments. An aspect of their concern for what others think of them and of their role is linked to how other adults within the school community respond to the needs and behaviors of the students with disabilities. These SETs seem to understand that how others view them has a relationship to their students’ access the environment/context. Their personal capital allows them to advocate for their students. Emma asserted,

“I really think it’s better for us to be integrated as part of the regular curriculum team, so when the new principal came I said that. I just think it’s better if we’re integrated, seen as part of the school and not as separate,” (p2, I1, p.8).

## **Summary and Discussion**

According to Youngs et al (2011) novice SETs reported resistance from general education teachers to inclusive practices. There have been times these veteran SETs

met some resistance to inclusive practices as was reported by the novice SETs studied by Youngs et al. (2011). Annie, Emma and Karen reported that individual general educators held differing expectations for their SET roles, an experience similar to that reported by Klingner and Vaughn (2002). Klingner and Vaughn also related that the general educators also differed in how much control of the classroom they ceded to the special educator, a position Annie also had related. Unlike Annie and Emma, the special education co-teachers studied by Wyatt-Ross (2007) were unwelcome visitors to the classrooms and felt as though they were treated as lesser professionals by the general educators they co-taught with. In contrast, Annie, Emma, and Karen opened up opportunities for their students with special education needs. York-Barr et al (2005) identified special educators as the link between their students and the complex array of resources available to them. The social capital of the special educator was linked to the student's opportunities for equitable experience (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010; York-Barr et al, 2005).

### **Perceived Control in Teaching Special Education**

Two themes that emerged here included (a) contextual features that impact the amount of control teachers feel they have over their actions/activities and (b) personal choice making within their contexts.

### **Adapting to the Context**

Despite being part of one school district the three schools presented very different contexts within which the special educators worked. The multi-tiered framework of schools was discussed at the beginning of this chapter. The district offered a continuum of special education service delivery models, from consultation, to self-contained classrooms, to center schools, but not every school provided the entire

range. A number of special education center programs were located within elementary schools. State and district decisions regarding instructional time and resource allocation influenced special education delivery. Each of the schools in this study served elementary age students with varying disabilities; yet, the range of instructional configurations was great.

**Resource allocations.** The number of SETs assigned to each school was linked to the number of students identified as having special education needs and the level of support students required. The special education center program for students who were deaf/hard of hearing was located at Thomas Paine Elementary. That school also offered self contained classrooms. The number of SETs at the school, seven, was larger than at the other two schools. However, Karen was one of only two special educators serving as resource teachers. Milton had a similar percentage of students needing special education services and had four teachers. Harding's percentage of students in the special education program was approximately half that of the other schools and it had the smallest population. There was only one special education teacher assigned. The number of teachers at a school and the instructional configurations offered were intertwined. Emma voiced this reality. "The reason why we have to do resource is because I can't be two places at once. So I have to group students by grade level" (P2, I1, p. 5).

Each of the SETs in this study had experienced times in their careers when the allocation of teachers had risen or fallen and their responsibilities had been impacted. However, at this time each expressed the opinion that the use of the Rtl process in determining eligibility for special education services was resulting declines in special

education enrollment and fewer teachers assigned to schools. Emma became the only SET assigned to Harding two years ago when “our numbers have dropped with the RTI model” (P2, I1, p.3). Emma further articulated her thoughts.

It’s a challenge, but every school is a little bit different and you sort of have to meet the challenge based on your school and the needs of your kids. I think we do a pretty good job. We do the best job that we can with the allocation that we have. (P2, I3A, p. 14)

**Instructional configurations.** Three instructional configurations were utilized primarily by these SETs; co-teaching, resource room, and consultation. At Milton Elementary co-teaching was the service model for all but a few students, who were served on a consultation basis. Implementing the co-teach model required placing several students with special education needs within one classroom. At Milton, all grade levels were involved in co-teaching. In one primary classroom I noted nearly a third of the class received either special education or early intervening services. At Harding Elementary School approximately half of the students in the co-taught class had IEPs. Using a co-teach model in schools with a small number of SETs raises a concern about having a disproportionate number of students with disabilities in some general education classes. Emma has had to make difficult decisions in her co-teaching choices. “I know co-teach is very popular. Teachers would like me to do it more and parents would like me to do it more. And that’s when I say I’m only one person” (P2, I3A, p. 15).

At Harding Elementary Emma also provides direct reading instruction to small groups of students in a resource room. This instruction is in addition to that provided by the general education teachers using the core reading curriculum. At Thomas Paine Elementary Karen provides instruction in both math and reading using primarily the core

general education curricula, supplementing it with more specialized materials. It is the methodology and management that distinguish Karen's teaching from that of general educators. For some students, Karen provides supplemental reading instruction, for others she is the primary reading teacher. According to Karen, for the latter

I don't really feel like a resource. I've become like the primary teacher for these kids, instead of them coming over and double dosing. Really, I've become a primary teacher. I like that. I really do because I really see kids growing (P3, I3b, p.11)

Each of the SETs provides consultation services for some of the students on their caseloads. Annie and Emma serve nearly all of their students for whom Mathematics is an area of need through consultation. This raises a real concern about whether students can be served adequately with the current allocations of resources.

**Instructional time constraints.** Scheduling instruction is affected by certain time restrictions. The requirements for various blocks of instruction, outlined in chapter 4, make scheduling special education services complicated. At Annie's school, Milton, where all students are served within general education classes, scheduling special education is one of the primary concerns. However, even in that school special education instruction is focused on reading, with mathematics receiving much less attention. At Thomas Paine Elementary Karen taught mathematics as well as reading, still scheduling was dependent upon the overall school schedule and the instructional time blocks dictated by the state. At Harding Emma's schedule was worked around the blocks of time required by the state, as well as restrictions faced by other programs that might serve ESE students. Emma pointed out, "One of the reasons why I picked the science and social studies time this year is because Title 1 is not allowed to pull from science. I can teach the science benchmarks," (P2, I1, p.5).

Special education may be provided during core subject instruction if the special educator is the teacher of record. However, students may not be removed from their primary reading or math class for supplemental instruction. At Harding Elementary, Emma provided consultation services in mathematics. She could not, physically, provide all services students needed within a day.

### **Making Personal Choices**

Each of the teachers indicated that they manage their work by prioritizing their many tasks. Since there are numerous aspects of their jobs that they understand they cannot control, they focus their energy on what they can control.

Controlling what they can. All three report that maximizing the time available to teach students is important to them. They arrange their schedules to be teaching as much as possible during the student day. All do most of their lesson planning outside of the contracted day. Karen and Emma do much of their teaching within their classroom environments where they arrange the space and the activities within to provide structure for their students. Karen spoke about using her planning period to arrange materials and space in anticipation of incoming classes.

It is my preparation time to get it out so that I don't waste any of their time, because their time is so limited with me. You saw today they have to go back early because they have to go to lunch, or there's not time built in for transition, so I have to make sure that I have all the time that I need to be able to teach what I need to teach. Plus it eliminates behavior problems when you have everything set out. (P3, I2D, p. 4)

Annie and Emma negotiate the learning environments in co-taught classes by planning with their partners. According to Annie, "We approach it as, I'm not just ESE, they're not just regular, this is our class and it's together," (P1, I2, p. 11).

## Summary and Discussion

Each of the SETs was very aware of and concerned with present or future allocations of special education resources. A decline in special education student enrollment, which the SETs attributed to RtI, was accompanied by a decline in SET allocations and changes to service delivery. Each SET recognized that the special education instructional configurations utilized at the school level were determined to some extent by the special education staff allocated to each school. This was the case despite all schools using a multi-tiered framework of instructional supports. Hoover and Patton (2008) described MTSS as dynamic, with the three tiers interrelated and interconnected. Those authors discuss role areas in which SETs need to be proficient in order to meet the challenges of multi-tiered instruction, proficiencies that could be utilized over a wide variety of instructional configurations.

In Annie's case all students with special education needs were fully included in general education classes, but Annie noted that the district office supported this model with adequate special education staff and that the principal was a leader in this effort. Still, financial support for extended co-planning had dwindled, and only teachers' belief in the importance of the co-planning and willingness to plan after contracted hours kept it afloat. This reflected what Klingner and Vaughn (2002) reported in their case study that as inclusion was prolonged financial support for co-planning waned, as did the co-planning itself.

In two of the schools, very little mathematics instruction was delivered by SETs. A focus on reading instruction meant Annie and Emma provided consultation for most of their students for whom mathematics was an area of need. This raises questions about whether students can be served optimally with the current allocations of resources. In

schools with a small number of SETs, using a co-teach model could lead to concern about having a disproportionate number of students with disabilities in some general education classes. Regulations regarding the amount of instructional time allotted to each content area combined with SET allocations that result in high student to teacher ratios hinder the provision of adequate instruction and intervention. Those circumstances obstruct provision of instruction with the levels of intensity, frequency, and duration needed by some students to achieve gains. Fuchs (2011) envisioned smaller caseloads with narrower responsibilities to enable SETs to provide intensive interventions for those students with the most severe learning difficulties

### **Role Enactment**

Three main themes, or roles, emerged within the SETs teaching practice: (a) problem-solver, (b) collaborator, and (c) leader. Each of these roles will be discussed in terms of its subthemes.

#### **Problem Solver**

Each of these three special educators considers herself a problem solver. In fact, the challenge of discerning how to address specific issues individual students present is part of the allure of the job for them.

In the role that I'm in now, and probably every role that I've been in as a special educator, the way that you make the most effect with kids and with parents in meeting their needs is to problem solve. Obviously there's something that they don't do well or they need to access in a different way and you need to figure out the best way to do that. So probably 98% of a special education teacher's job should be problem-solving; figuring out how to access and help them gain the skills that they have deficits in, and how to use the strengths that they have to support skills that they need to gain.  
(P1, I1, p. 1)

**Interventionist.** Annie and Emma both provide early intervening services to students within the classes they co-teach. They also consult with other general

education teachers, administrative staff, and other related service providers to design appropriate academic and behavioral interventions for non-ESE students. Emma noted that for some students with disabilities there are times with when professionals suspect that a specific learning disability or language impairment also exists. In this case she would provide intervention and monitor its effects to determine if further evaluation is warranted.

The tiered framework at Karen's school does not include her in providing early intervening services, however, the instruction she provides, particularly in her "double dose" classes, may be considered tier 2 or 3 intervention. Karen ferrets out curriculum modifications, teaching strategies, and accommodations to surmount the challenges faced by individual students. These students may be taught in small groups and in one-to-one situations. Emma's resource room teaching is also much that of an interventionist. She puts great thought into providing the most appropriate strategies, content, and materials for the individual students she teaches. Neither Emma nor Karen separated their work into the categories of teacher versus interventionist; however Annie had thoughts on the specific nature of an interventionist. "I see the interventionist as working with a child who is not special ed. but using my special ed. tools to help them make gains," (P1, I3, p.7).

**Consultant.** If one defines a consultant as a specialist or advisor, Emma, Annie and Karen all fulfill this aspect of their roles. These SETs are the specialists other teachers and administrators seek out for advice when they encounter students with a particular learning or behavior challenge. Each carries within her a professional special educator's toolkit, developed throughout their careers. Each toolkit contains different

tools based upon the work they have done, the students they have taught, the parents they have encountered, and the teachers they support. Emma and Annie discussed helping teachers design visual schedules and behavior plans for students. Each of the SETs makes specialized instructional materials available to teachers; in fact Annie opens her storage room/office to the faculty. As I spent a day with each of these SETs there were numerous examples of staff members approaching them to ask about how to address various challenges posed by students' special education needs, or other school issues. When Emma described her role she indicated that she was a resource to the administrators and teachers with whom she worked. The consultant work allows these SETs to approach student needs through support to teachers. Emma described her role in this way.

I think my main role is being a teacher, and then I do consultation with students who have consultation on their IEPs. But I've always been a resource in the school for people who have questions about students who have learning issues. I'll work on the aide's schedule. I've always been fortunate in that the principals that I've worked with have taken into consideration the needs of the ESE students, when it comes to overall kinds of scheduling issues. I think I've been a resource for the administration or for the support team. So I'm a teacher but I'm also a consultant I guess. (P2, I1, p.3)

## **Collaborator**

**Co-teaching.** Annie and Emma collaborate with general educators as co-teachers in reading classes. Each is a full partner in the co-taught classrooms, sharing responsibility for planning, teaching, and assigning grades. With their general education partners they develop, implement and monitor interventions and classroom behavior management systems. Both special educators consider all the students in the co-taught classrooms their charges and plan instruction and interventions for the students with IEPs and those without. They have had to become knowledgeable about the general

education curriculum as well as the standards the students are expected to master.

Annie described the stance she and her co-teachers take. “We approach it as I'm not just ESE, they're not just regular education, this is our class and it's together,” (P1, I2, p. 11).

**Engaging with others.** Each of these SETs collaborate with colleagues on schoolwide and grade level teams; making decisions about curriculum, instruction, behavior management, tiered intervention, and school level initiatives. Annie works closely with a software manufacturer in piloting a program meant to accommodate reading and writing. Emma has invited outside agencies with disability specific expertise to assist in working with students and their families. All three collaborate with the principals in their schools in developing schedules for themselves and the paraprofessionals with whom they work. Each also collaborates with other special education and related services personnel to provide services identified on students' individual education plans. Developing the IEPs is a collaborative process, enhanced by the use of interactive technology that allows the document to be projected as it is being written, so that all present can review and discuss it. Annie mentioned some of her collaborators.

I collaborate with a lot of people; the nurse, the principal, the guidance counselor, and the custodian, because he's a support for one of our behavior children. So everybody at the school works well together and collaborates across their professional lines. (p1, I1, p. 3)

## **Leader**

At the time of the interviews Annie and Karen held formal leadership roles in their schools, and Emma did as recently as the prior year. That each was approached by others for advice on teaching practice and administrative tasks suggests they also

provided informal leadership. Each was a veteran teacher who had developed working relationships with school staff over many years.

**Formal leadership roles.** Each of these educators has assumed formal leadership roles within the structure of their schools, such as team leader for the special education team, participant on RtI leadership team, and curriculum council member. Each of these SETs develops schedules for paraprofessionals, provides them training, and gives input into their evaluations. Due to their expertise, Emma, Karen, and Annie have been asked to provide professional development to other faculty regarding special education and other topics. All have had occasion during their careers to provide professional development to colleagues throughout the district and beyond.

**Informal leadership.** Because the data for this study were collected primarily through interview it is difficult to demonstrate a great deal of evidence of informal leadership. During my observations Annie and Karen were approached throughout the day by several individual staff members asking them how to handle schedule changes, student behavior issues, parent meetings, recommendations for IEP changes, and an afterhours parent event. Teachers came to them for instructional advice. Being sought out for consultation and as resources by other faculty and administrators, suggests the special educators are seen as informal leaders.

### **Summary and Discussion**

Solving problems was a defining factor in the roles these SETs played. Every day was a series of challenges, some more complex than others that required thought and action on the part of these teachers. This aspect of the role is supported in the literature by Brownell et al (2010) who pointed out that problem solving and decision making are necessary to carry out the SET's role, and by Cook and Cook (2004) who suggested

that SETs' decisions often must be made on the spot, relying on previous knowledge. These three SETs have years of experience on which to draw, assisting them in making those on the spot decisions, yet they also deliberate, research, and experiment with solutions on a regular basis.

When the participants in this study began their careers, special education teachers were isolated in the school and in their practice, seen as outsiders, as were their students. The SETs studied by Wyatt-Ross (2007) were marginalized in their roles as co-teachers in schools implementing RtI. In contrast, the SETs in this study report feeling more a part of the school community than ever before. They each appreciate being a respected part of the faculty, not separate from their general education colleagues. They interact with faculty and staff all day long. Yet they continue to feel the special nature of their work, and at times Karen still feels some isolation. These SETs exerted a great deal of energy developing relationships with their general education colleagues, as was reported of the novice teachers in the study by Youngs et al (2011), the expert teacher followed by Klingner and Vaughn (2002), and the teacher leaders studied by York-Barr et al. (2005).

The three SETs participated in activities that fall within the dimensions of practice of teacher leaders identified by York-Barr and Duke (2004). These included coordination and management tasks such as scheduling, encouraging parent and community involvement, participating in professional organizations, and participation in school change/school improvement through participating in school wide decision-making. These SETs also participated in research, confronted the status quo in the school culture through their attempts to change teacher perceptions of special

education, assisted in the professional development of colleagues through mentoring and leading workshops, and worked with colleges and universities to prepare future SETs.

Emma's SET role was much like the interventionist described by Simonsen et al. (2010). She provided instruction in co-taught general education settings and small group resource settings. Emma acted as a case manager, providing consultation services and managing resources, such as paraprofessionals, to serve students in classrooms when she could not provide direct instruction herself. Annie also served as a case manager to students enrolled in special education, but her teaching was diffused among a larger body of students with and without special education needs. These SETs' role enactment could be envisioned within Hoover and Patton's (2008) circular model of contemporary roles for special educators in multi-tiered instruction, which emphasizes the interrelatedness of the roles. SETs would provide support across tiers and assure appropriate instruction to learners with disabilities and those who are at-risk (Hoover & Patton). The five roles illustrated in the model represent areas in which SETs would need to be highly skilled and that those authors regard as critical.

Each of the SETs reported providing job embedded professional development to general educators, through collaboration, consultation, co-teaching, and more formal in-service workshops. This development of the capacity of general educators is indicative of the role of the SET as described by McLeskey and Waldron (2011), Simonsen et al, (2010), and Zigmond (2007).

### **Further Discussion Related to Policy and Practice**

In chapter 2 the governance of special education as written in law and policy and the guidance offered in the literature was examined. At the intersection between the

two were found four pillars of practice suggested for the role of the special educator: (a) collaboration, (b) assessment, (c) instruction and intervention, and (d) IEP development and implementation. Each of these dimensions was featured prominently in the roles played by the three teacher participants in this study. Each of these special educators spent considerable amounts of time and energy in collaboration with other special education and general education teachers, school administrators and leadership staff, related services personnel and paraprofessionals, as well as parents and professionals from outside agencies or the school district. Brownell et al. (2010), Hoover and Patton (2008), and McLeskey and Waldron (2011) all noted the importance of collaboration in successful delivery of specially designed instruction and interventions within a multi-tiered structure.

Assessment was also a substantial part of the work of the special educator. These SETs were involved in using assessment for progress monitoring, measuring student achievement, and using data for instructional planning; in other words applying assessment data as mentioned in literature by Hoover and Patton (2008) and McLeskey and Waldron (2011). The special educators worked with general educators to identify and provide necessary test accommodations for students. The three SETs noted that the amount of time spent in assessment interfered with instructional time. They felt that the pressure associated with the high stakes nature of statewide end of year testing was potentially detrimental to students.

These SETs' intent was to spend the majority of the student day providing instruction and intervention, a focus of the SET role noted in the literature (Brownell et al., 2010; Hoover & Patton, 2008; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; Zigmond, 2007).

Although time use was not measured as part of this study, SETs reported behaviors such as scheduling shortened planning periods and lunch breaks, and reserving most paperwork and lesson planning for after school, evening, or weekend hours, which suggests a commitment to making the most of potential instructional time. I considered the instruction I observed to be targeted and efficient. Two teachers reported providing early intervening services and all designed and implemented academic and behavioral interventions for individual students.

The special educators involved in this study were very aware of their responsibilities for developing and implementing IEPs, a requirement that was discussed both in policy and in the literature (Simonsen et al., 2010; Hoover & Patton, 2008). They were learning to use the State's online IEP system, a task that was time consuming. Although none of these teachers was responsible for scheduling IEP meetings or generating the paperwork required for documenting notice to parents, they generated the IEP paperwork and were responsible for quarterly reports of progress toward IEP objectives. Staff allocations and school schedules did not always allow for the teachers to provide what they felt was enough service. How those concerns were negotiated in terms of the IEP was not clarified in these findings. Chapter 6 addresses conclusions that may be drawn from these findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for further research.

Table 5-1. Influences that Guide Special Educators' Work

Category	Themes	Subthemes
Attitudes about Teaching Special Education	Inner Drive	Service Lifelong Learning Personal Accountability
	Commitment to the Profession	Advocating for the role of SETs Mentoring novices
	Learner Focus	Children's needs first Individual versus group needs
	Time Consciousness	Maximizing Students' Day Instructional Time versus other duties Not Enough Time
Others' Expectations of Special Educators	Legitimacy of the role	Others expect much from me
	Continued Need for Advocacy	Changing Perceptions
Perceived Control in Teaching Special Education	Adapting to the context	Resource Allocations Instructional Configurations Instructional Time Constraints
	Making Personal Choices	Controlling what they can
Role Enactment	Problem Solver	Interventionist Consultant Resource
	Collaborator	Co-teaching Engaging with others
	Leader	Formal Leadership Roles Informal Leadership

## CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this case study was to explore the role of special education teachers working in elementary schools utilizing multi-tiered systems of instructional supports. The perspectives of three SETs at different school sites within one medium sized Florida school district were gathered through personal interviews and observations of the contexts in which they taught. The three-fold aspects of the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) framed this inquiry, which links intention and perceived behavioral control to enacted performance. The overall question guiding this study addressed how elementary school special education teachers understand, explain, and enact their roles. A subordinate question addressed how special education teachers negotiate ambiguities within their roles.

To date there has been little investigation into how SETs define their roles within elementary schools utilizing multi-tiered systems of support. This study contributes to the professional literature by adding to research on the role of special educators in this contemporary context, in this case as viewed through the experiences of veteran SETs. This chapter includes a discussion of the limitations of the study, conclusions drawn from the findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for further research.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Before conclusions can be drawn from this analysis, limitations of this study must be outlined. This is a case study, not intended for broad generalization, but undertaken to provide preliminary insight into how veteran SETs think about and enact their roles in one medium sized school district in Florida. Application of these findings to others' contexts should be assessed by readers as transferable to their own situations. It

should also be noted that this inquiry was delimited to only three SETs, who were nominated by district personnel as being successful at negotiating their roles. Less capable participants might have responded differently. The three SETs were also similar in age, and shared the same gender and ethnicity. With each having over 25 years teaching experience, they were nearing the end of their tenure; one was planning to retire within two years. All three had received their initial training as SETs soon after the passage of PL 94-142 in 1975. It is likely that less experienced SETs, and those who were prepared as SETs more recently might hold different views and enact their roles in different ways.

The students whom these SETs taught, and the time at which this study was conducted, might also have a bearing on the findings. The majority of the students taught by these SETs had high incidence disabilities and spent most of their school day in general education classes. Responses might have been different if most of their students had more significant or low incidence disabilities. With regard to timing, the interviews and observations were completed between the months of March and June, when much end of year assessment was taking place. The SETs' focus on, and time involved with, testing might have influenced their responses pertaining to assessment. With these limitations and delimitations in mind, several conclusions can be drawn from this analysis.

### **Conclusions**

The field of special education is continually evolving, as is the role of the SET. This study provides a snapshot taken within a period of transformation for special education as a field, for the role of SETs, and for the organization of elementary schools

as they shift to the adoption of multi-tiered systems of support for a wide diversity of students.

The findings suggest that these SETs possessed an inner drive to pursue a career of service to others, one that provided opportunities for continual learning, and for which they felt personally accountable. They demonstrated commitment to the field of special education by mentoring novices and voicing the continued need for special educators. They were learner focused, prioritizing their work based on student needs. They were extremely conscious of time, feeling an urgency to maximize it, and were aware of the impact that the use of time could have on a learner.

With regard to the professional norms within their schools, the SETs believed their roles were viewed as legitimate by colleagues, but expressed concern about others' expectations of them. For example, the SETs saw a continued need to advocate for students with disabilities within their schools because resistance to teaching students with disabilities among some general educators remained a reality in their workplaces.

Many aspects of their work were not wholly within their control, so these veteran SETs valued being flexible, continually adapting to their environment. These SETs made personal choices that reflected their priorities, to control whatever aspects they felt they could. When these SETs talked about how they enacted their roles, despite challenges they faced, they emerged as problem-solvers, collaborators, and teacher leaders.

Each SET enacted her role under the long shadow of federal policy embodied in the IDEA. As such, their roles were more circumscribed than general educators by

specific requirements related to collaboration, assessment, specially designed instruction, and IEP development and implementation. Consideration of SETs in multi-tiered contexts pointed to both enduring and emerging aspects of the SET role with implications for the role of special educators.

### **The Role of the Special Educator and Collaboration**

Collaboration has been a feature of SETs work outlined in policy and reflected in the SETs studied. The extent to which these SETs engaged in collaborative practices with general educators was notable. These SETs reported they felt fully accepted as equals by their colleagues, which was not the case in earlier years of their careers. Collaboration has strong roots in special education; PL 94-142 called for multidisciplinary teams, including parents, to develop IEP's along with special educators. However, the considerable time and energy the SETs in this study utilized in collaboration with general educators may be indicative of the inclusive instruction provided in the current era in special education practice.

### **The Role of the Special Educator and Assessment**

Assessment is another element that has driven the work of special education teaching, from diagnostic-prescriptive approaches to curriculum based measures to standards driven high stakes testing. Enduring aspects of assessment pertaining to the SET role are its use in evaluation and eligibility determination, and the use of data as a basis for instructional decision-making and progress monitoring. However, an emerging focus of all educators, including SETs, has been a response to federal and state policies that have increased pressure for teacher and school accountability. Students with disabilities now are required to participate in statewide assessments that reflect general education standards, and to achieve annual progress goals. These SETs took

part in administering the formal assessment programs required at their schools as well as progress monitoring for students engaged in interventions. The prevailing opinion among the SETs studied was that students spent too much time engaged in assessment, to the detriment of instructional time.

### **The Role of the Special Educator and Instructional Delivery**

Tensions abound in the role of the SET when considering instructional delivery. SETs in this study entered this profession to teach students with special needs, and noted that their most enjoyable, least stressful time at work was when they were engaged with their students. Each placed a premium on instructional time, and managed non-instructional tasks to optimize it. Yet, the attention and time that they could devote to their students' instruction was mediated by numerous contextual factors that often were policy driven.

An enduring aspect of instructional delivery is the expectation that specially designed instruction will be provided based on individual student requirements. These SETs indicated that despite their focus on individual student's needs, there were situations when students did not receive specialized instruction due to inadequate resource allocations. In these circumstances the SETs experienced dissonance. In some cases the SETs context and job design did not allow them to provide the instruction IDEA mandates.

SETs recognized that students with disabilities are their primary caseload, although they considered children without disabilities in co-taught classes their responsibility as well. An emerging aspect of the SET role regarding instructional delivery concerns an increasing responsibility for instruction and intervention throughout

the multiple levels of tiered frameworks. This includes the provision of early intervening services to students not yet identified as eligible for special education.

### **The Role of the Special Educator and Individualized Education Planning**

A significant role for SETs continues to be the development and implementation of the IEP. The reduction in paperwork called for in IDEA 2004 has resulted in these SETs no longer scheduling IEP meetings or being responsible for handling all documentation requirements. The State has developed an interactive online IEP document that is transportable across school districts, which should reduce paper use and standardize information sharing. However, considerable thought and time continues to be necessarily expended in the IEP process. Although SETs value the IEP and the opportunity IEP meetings offer for collaborating with parents and other professionals in the interest of the student, IEP meetings continue to interfere with instructional time, despite SETs efforts to avoid this.

### **The Role of the Special Educator and Professional Focus**

The lines between the particularity of special education and the wide embrace of general education are becoming obscured in the context of multi-tiered systems of support. SETs have become increasingly involved in the teaching of general education standards using general education curriculum. A comparison revealed that the SETs job description in this district encompassed all of the responsibilities found for general education elementary teachers and added eight, five of which pertain to IEP development and implementation. It appears that in this district the demands for performance of the role of the special education teacher is not dissimilar to that of the general education teacher, but added value is expected through IEP related duties.

Although the state Department of Education and the school district have policies in place regarding MTSS, much has been left to the schools to determine how the SET will be utilized and at which tiers. This study demonstrated that there is not one well defined role for the SET within MTSS, and the role is necessarily variable depending upon context and student population. The result is a demonstration of what Fuchs, Fuchs, and Stecker (2010) referred to as a “blurring” of special education when it is considered within the context of standards based school reform.

An enduring aspect of the special educator role is that of bringing specialized expertise to instruction, demonstrated by SETs in their capacity for problem solving. The sharing of this expertise through consultation with colleagues and administrators across multiple tiers of support has increased the breadth of influence the SET employs as a schoolwide resource. This raises the question of whether school wide influence diminishes instructional intensity for students who need it most. A companion question is whether SETs’ emerging influence across the school, as evidenced in the comments of this study’s SETs, would be diminished if their practice is confined to intensive interventions with only a small number of students. At this time caseloads and contextual expectations constrain SETs ability to perform both instruction and consultation optimally.

### **The Role of the Special Educator and Professional Development**

Federal education policy requires special educators to become knowledgeable about general education standards and curriculum. Most of the recent school level professional development made available to the SETs in this study revolved around this emerging responsibility. SETs were required to become dually certified, a response to

the IDEA 2004 requirement to demonstrate competency in core subjects that they teach. Statements from SETs suggest that much of the professional development available to the schools has been centered on enhancing the Tier 1 instruction that is offered. Special educators may benefit from opportunities that will help them deliver Tier 3 interventions and to act as resources or consultants to classroom teachers regarding differentiated instruction at Tiers 1 and 2.

Brownell et al. (2010) asked how district, school, classroom, and teacher variables influence the work of SETs. The SETs in this study felt constrained by state and district policies regarding both special education and general education that restricted time use, mandated the use of multiple assessments, forced the pace of instruction, and restricted intervention/identification through RtI. They valued support from and relationship with the principal and colleagues, and being allowed flexibility within the structures of the school. At the classroom level, relationships with co-teachers, and the willingness and ability of general education teachers to look at the needs of students and provide the needed accommodations and modifications were key influences.

The SETs themselves approached their work with deeply held personal convictions regarding the value of the individual children they taught. The veteran SETs in this study demonstrated the accuracy of the claim by Ferretti and Eisenman (2010) that policy is implemented at the teacher level. These SETs practices were heavily influenced by special education policy, yet they reflected the individual values of the teachers and the legitimacy of their place within the school context.

## **Implications for Practice: Areas that Need Critical Attention**

The value our society places on children who struggle to learn should be reflected in the educational opportunities offered to them. If this is the case there is cause for concern. In order to demonstrate that students and high quality instruction are valued, policy makers and administrators must pay critical attention to the following areas.

1. Opportunities for SETs to provide instruction
2. Opportunities for students to learn
3. Opportunities for professional development
4. Opportunities for systemic supports for inclusive instruction

### **Opportunities for SETs to Provide Instruction**

At the center of the concerns expressed by participants in this study was having enough opportunity for instruction so that student outcomes would be optimized. Despite differences in the contexts of the three schools and in the utilization of the SETs within MTSS a common concern was that there are too many areas of interference to instructional time. Administrators and policy makers should examine practices to determine how current resources might be redistributed to allow for increased instructional opportunities.

MTSS frameworks, as viewed by Hoover and Patton (2008), are meant to provide flexibility in movement of students among tiers of instruction. Current regulations regarding uninterrupted time for core instruction, allowable instructional configurations for special education and Tier 2 interventions through Title 1, and the matching of students to teachers for accountability purposes, have resulted in reduced flexibility for scheduling intervention and reduced fluidity in instructional grouping. Documentation requirements for lesson planning, intervention, referral for evaluation,

progress monitoring, etc. need to be clarified and streamlined so that these processes enhance instruction rather than interfere with a teacher' productivity. Shifts in these requirements could allow administrators and teachers more flexibility in how to provide necessary instruction and intervention within their schools.

District requirements for pacing of instruction highlight a tension between instruction of the individual and of the group. SETs know that one of the differences among special education students is the pace at which they learn. To accelerate student learning more time is needed by some students than is currently made available. Difficult decisions must be made regarding where that time will come from. Perhaps it is time to think differently about special education and allow for districts to provide instruction to students outside of the regular school day. Alternatively, policy makers and legislators might consider adding to the length of the school day and extending the school year for all students, at the same time relaxing rules regarding how and when intervention may be provided.

There is irony in that the apparent success in lessening what was perceived as over identification of students as learning disabled may be resulting in under identification. A goal for the utilization of MTSS as a framework for organizing instruction in elementary schools is preventing and remediating academic difficulties (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009). Implementation of the Rtl model over 3 years in 318 elementary schools in Florida resulted in decreased rates of identification of students with learning disabilities (Torgesen, 2009). Interventions leading to improved reading outcomes and teacher confidence in their ability to provide appropriate intervention before referring for evaluation were suggested as possible reasons for the drop in rates.

However, Torgesen cautioned that student achievement may not be the only factor leading to these changes in identification rates. SETs in the current study expressed concern that the lowered rates of identification may be due in some part to general education teachers' reluctance to pursue the cumbersome referral process. Concerns were also voiced about the possibility of delayed identification leading to greater challenges in remediation.

Reduced enrollments of students with disabilities results in reduced allocations of resources for special education, which in turn can lead to reduced opportunities for students with special education needs to achieve the best possible outcomes. District administrators would do well to reconsider assignment of SETs to schools.

Paraprofessionals were a valuable resource deployed with skill by the SETs in this study. Nevertheless, it is unreasonable to expect that one SET can adequately provide all necessary special education instruction, intervention, and support to 20 or more students across six grade levels. Such staffing ratios result in untenable instructional configurations that reduce opportunities for students to learn.

There is a tension within the role of SET between instructional responsibilities and those of collaborating and consulting with colleagues. Both of these responsibilities were highly valued by the SETs and were seen as pursuing the goal of improved outcomes for students with disabilities. However, the perceived demand on the SETs to perform both of these roles was intense. SETs job design, deployment to schools, and caseloads should be aligned so that instruction, collaboration, and IEP development responsibilities are more reasonable.

This study inquired into roles of SETs in elementary schools, however views put forward by Deshler (2005) in a discussion of the challenges of teaching adolescents with LD at the secondary level may have relevance here. Deshler argues that there are “vital, yet distinctly unique roles” (p 123) that must be maintained for content area teachers and for SETs. He recommends that SETs primary role be to teach strategies and skills to students that would increase their ability to access content area curriculum. Hoover and Patton (2008), promote the involvement of the SET at Tiers 1 and 2 to provide consistent support to students later identified as needing special education. It is worth considering what value there may be at the elementary level in maintaining a clear distinction between the roles of SETs and of general educators. Thought should be given to whether more or less integrated roles would be better suited to primary versus intermediate grades.

### **Opportunities for Students to Learn**

Students with learning disabilities benefit most from an instructional model in which gaps in learning are identified, explicit instruction that is closely related to the area of need is provided systematically, and progress is closely monitored (Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003). Although effective instructional approaches are similar for students with and without learning disabilities, differences in degree distinguish special education from general education (Crockett et al., 2012). Lower teacher-student ratios and more intensive instruction are needed by some students with LD (Vaughn & Linan-Thompson). Schools organized around MTSS have the potential to offer opportunities for such small group instruction. Yet SETs continue to see barriers to providing this intensive instruction in the form of inflexible scheduling requirements, instructional time

lost to assessment that may not be closely tied to instruction, and inflexibility in student groupings.

SETs voiced concern about the amount of time students spend in assessment. Assessment that is not directly tied to monitoring achievement, progress toward learning goals, and informing subsequent instruction, should be abandoned. It is possible that with planning and coordination student assessment could be streamlined and the resultant data be used more effectively. Although these three SETs appeared to understand how assessment data can be used to inform instruction, such may not be the case for all SETs or general education teachers.

SETs report that despite the support for inclusion in their schools, there are still general educators that resist making instructional adaptations needed for students with disabilities. SETs continue to find it necessary to advocate for appropriate accommodations and modifications in general education and, at times, even for the presence of students with disabilities in those classrooms. Many students with special education needs receive core instruction within general education classrooms with heterogeneous populations. General education teachers are expected to differentiate instruction to meet the academic demands of a diverse student body. The SETs report that one of their responsibilities has been to provide a generous amount of support to general educators to guide differentiation, develop specific academic interventions, and to address the intensive behavioral needs some students also present.

Policy makers and administrators must understand that even with sound organizational frameworks in place, and high quality core instruction taking place, students who need specially designed instruction will exist and there will be a need for

teachers with specialized expertise who can teach them. It is likely that general educators will continue to need support from specialists to ensure that the students with disabilities they teach have access to high quality instruction. Job design for both SETs and general educators must allow ample opportunity for instruction and collaboration with colleagues to support student learning.

### **Opportunities for Professional Development**

Although their roles call for supporting general educators, SETs with a deep understanding of core principals of special education: individualized, intensive, flexible, research-based instruction (Cook et al, 2011) are better positioned to negotiate the ambiguities of their professional practice across a variety of structural configurations. SETs serving students with diverse disabilities need opportunities to hone their teaching skills and to increase their knowledge of disability related instructional issues. One could argue that the value special educators bring to the school resides not only in their understanding of how to teach reading and math, but in their ability to pinpoint specific obstacles to learning that students face and then to find ways to surmount those obstacles.

Brownell et al. (2010) identified an array of specialized knowledge needed by SETs and pointed out the importance of domain specific pedagogy. For practicing SETs there remains a need for professional development that would elevate specialized skill acquisition, their expertise in what Zigmond calls the “special stuff” and “special ways” (2007, p. 119) of teaching, and the skills that Fuchs (2011) suggests would enable SETs to teach students with the most significant learning difficulties.

Special educators might benefit from the opportunity to share a collegial professional community with other SETs. A professional learning community could

provide socialization into the role of special educator that research on early career SETs suggests may be lacking (Youngs et al, 2011). Opportunity for professional socialization as it relates to developing shared role expectations and professional norms is of particular concern in schools with only one SET.

### **Opportunities for Systemic Supports for Inclusive Instruction**

There must be sustained opportunities available to schools for systemic supports for inclusive instruction. Within schools using MTSS collaborative decision-making is called for to determine needs and allocate resources for diverse students. SETs and their general education colleagues will need continued training in collaborative practice, data analysis, research based instruction, and differentiation to bolster instruction in the general education curriculum. Administrators are called on to provide and maintain opportunities in school schedules for this important collaboration.

One of the schools in this study was a professional development community school (PDC) that took advantage of supports provided through a partnership between the school district and the university. It would be wise to assure such opportunities are made available to every school. If such supports are available, but not being utilized, it makes sense to determine why schools do not take advantage of these opportunities. Perhaps there are ways to tailor supports to schools' needs.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Special education does not happen in a vacuum. The context of the schools clearly affected the work of these three SETs. The presence of a multi-tiered framework of educational supports influenced the special educator's role related decision making in varying ways, although there were similarities among the SETs. It may be of value to survey a larger sample of SETs working in schools utilizing MTSS to investigate their

roles and related professional development needs, perhaps at different stages of their careers. It may also be valuable to determine if special educators' involvement in providing early intervening services is changing the tenor of relationships between SETs and general education teachers.

These SETs expressed urgency regarding instructional time. It would be interesting to utilize a tool such as that developed by Vannest et al. (2005) to quantify teacher's time use. Modifications to job design could be tested to establish if such alterations support increased instructional time usage. Possibly quantifying time spent in non instructional tasks could help determine how to streamline responsibilities of the special education teacher.

This study of the work of veteran SETs is a counterweight to the wealth of recent literature regarding novice special educators. As districts consider how to avoid the well documented attrition of SETs they may look for patterns that emerge between concerns of the novice and concerns of the veteran, as well as contextual features that may serve to sustain SETs in their jobs. A study of novice general and special education teachers (Jones, Youngs, & Frank, 2013) reported that perception of support from colleagues and feelings of fit within a school context were predictors of retention in novice SETs. The veteran SETs, who were faced with ambiguities surrounding their roles, reported having strong relationships with colleagues, and strong support from their principals. Further study of the perceived importance of contextual features across career stages would be helpful.

Use of MTSS as an organizing structure in Florida was meant to support effective instruction, and organize allocation of resources based on student need (Lockman,

2011b). Although steps have been taken to realize this goal, what we learn from the stories of these three SETs is that there remain barriers to offering high quality effective instruction to students with special education needs. The implementation of MTSS in these schools has not alleviated the perception of SETs that there is more to be done in the effort to improve outcomes for students with disabilities in elementary schools.

Writing about contemporary schooling of students with LD, Crockett et al. (2012) pointed out “although school-wide models of support target the school-improvement priorities of general education policy under the ESEA, their utility in meeting the individually focused imperatives of special education policy under the IDEA is less clear” (p. 431). Results from this small study suggest that efforts at meeting those imperatives are uneven, and that understanding the intersection of MTSS and the role of SETs warrants further study.

APPENDIX A  
DISTRICT SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER JOB DESCRIPTION

**SCHOOL DISTRICT OF XXX COUNTY  
JOB DESCRIPTION**

**Must be certified in ESE and Elementary Education.**

**KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND ABILITIES:**

Ability to develop and implement an IEP. Knowledge of child development and especially of characteristics of students with disabilities in the age group assigned. Knowledge of the prescribed curriculum. Knowledge of current educational research relating to the instruction of students with disabilities. Knowledge of the Code of Ethics and Principals of Professional Conduct. Basic understanding and knowledge of use of current technology. Knowledge of learning styles and skill in using varied teaching methods to address student learning styles. Skill in oral and written communication with students, parents and others. Ability to plan and implement activities for maximum effectiveness. Ability to assess levels of student achievement effectively, analyze test results and prescribe actions for improvement. Ability to maintain appropriate student supervision so that students have a safe and orderly environment in which to learn. Ability to work effectively with peers, administrators and others. Knowledge of laws, policies and procedures relating to the education of students with disabilities and of the operation of adaptive equipment required by students.

**REPORTS TO:**

Principal or designee

**JOB GOAL**

To provide an educational atmosphere that promotes intellectual, emotional, physical and psychological growth and maturation of students in accordance with District, state, and federal standards.
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**SUPERVISES:**

Assigned Personnel

**PERFORMANCE RESPONSIBILITIES:**

- \*(1) Create or select short and long-range plans and write student's annual IEP based on a review of district and state curriculum priorities, instructional priorities and student's disability.
- \*(2) Implement each student's IEP and document student progress.
- \*(3) Revise plans based on student needs.
- \*(4) Collaborate with students, parents, school staff and other appropriate

- persons to assist in meeting student needs. Provide leadership for staffings and IEP Meetings.
- \* (5) Facilitate mainstreaming and inclusionary opportunities.
  - \* (6) Provide learning experiences based on each student's IEP goals and objectives and present materials at the appropriate level for each student.
  - \* (7) Work as a team member with occupational, physical, and speech/language therapists and implement recommendations to meet student needs.
  - \* (8) Provide for assisting students in daily living needs, such as toileting, feeding and personal hygiene.
  - \* (9) Plan, prepare, and conduct a variety of learning activities considering students' learning styles and special needs in order to enhance the application of critical, creative and evaluative thinking capabilities of students.
  - \* (10) Select, develop, modify and/or adapt materials, technology and resources to support learning objectives and address students' learning styles and special needs.
  - \* (11) Create or select goals and objectives for unit and daily plans based on a review of district and state curriculum priorities, student profiles and instructional priorities.
  - \* (12) Identify specific intended learning outcomes which are challenging, meaningful and measurable.
  - \* (13) Apply principles of learning and effective teaching in instructional delivery.
  - \* (14) Maintain academic focus by using a variety of motivational techniques.
  - \* (15) Provide quality work for students which is focused on meaningful, relevant and engaging learning experiences.
  - \* (16) Sequence content and activities appropriately.
  - \* (17) Maintain instructional momentum with smooth and efficient transitions from one activity to another.
  - \* (18) Provide instruction on safety procedures and proper handling of materials and equipment.
  - \* (19) Assist students in assessing, interpreting and evaluating information from multiple sources.
  - \* (20) Encourage self-assessment by students and assist them in developing plans for improving their performance, as appropriate.
  - \* (21) Monitor learning activities and provide feedback to students about the appropriateness of responses and quality of work with a focus on improving student performance.
  - \* (22) Evaluate the effectiveness of instructional units and teaching strategies.
  - \* (23) Interpret and use data (including but not limited to standardized and other test results) for diagnosis, instructional planning and program evaluation.
  - \* (24) Develop and use ongoing assessments to monitor student progress to verify that learning is occurring to adjust curriculum and instruction.
  - \* (25) Administer tests, including standardized tests, in accordance with

directions provided, including proctoring and secure handling of materials.

- \*(26) Communicate high learning expectations for all students.
- \*(27) Foster student responsibility, appropriate social behavior, integrity, appreciation of cultural diversity, and respect for self and others by role modeling and learning activities.
- \*(28) Communicate effectively, orally and in writing, with other professionals, students, parents and community.
- \*(29) Provide accurate and timely information to parents and students about academic and behavioral performance of students.
- \*(30) Write or participate in the formation of student IEP or 504 Plans or any other learning plans based on individual student needs.
- \*(31) Establish routines and procedures and encourage students to follow them consistently.
- \*(32) Establish and maintain appropriate discipline and effective behavior management techniques.
- \*(33) Demonstrate positive interpersonal relationships with students, peers, supervisors, and school/community.
- \*(34) Collaborate with students, parents, school staff and other appropriate persons to assist in meeting student needs.
- \*(35) Work with other teachers in curriculum development, special activities and sharing ideas and resources.
- \*(36) Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of curriculum content.
- \*(37) Engage in continuing improvement of professional knowledge and skills including instructional methodology, learning theory, curriculum trends and content.
- \*(38) Develop and implement a Professional Development Plan annually in accordance with state and district requirements.
- \*(39) Demonstrate punctuality and regular attendance.
- \*(40) Assist in enforcement of school rules, administrative regulations and Board policy.
- \*(41) Comply with policies, procedures and programs.
- \*(42) Act in a professional and ethical manner and adhere at all times to the Code of Ethics and Principles of Professional Conduct.
- \*(43) Establish and maintain a positive, safe and non-threatening learning environment in which students are encouraged to be actively engaged in the learning process.
- \*(44) Support school improvement initiatives by active participation in school activities, services and programs.
- \*(45) Manage materials and equipment effectively.
- \*(46) Instruct and supervise the work of volunteers and aides when assigned.
- \*(47) Supervise students at all times to ensure a safe and orderly environment.
- \*(48) Maintain a clean, attractive and organized learning environment.
- \*(49) Maintain accurate and complete records in accordance with District procedures.

- \* (50) Maintain confidentiality of student and other professional information.
- \* (51) Maintain student grade, attendance, and conduct records in accordance with established procedures.
- \* (52) Recognize overt indicators of student distress or abuse and take appropriate intervention, referral, or reporting actions.
- (53) Perform other duties as assigned.

*\*Essential Performance Responsibilities*

**PHYSICAL REQUIREMENTS:**

Heavy Work: Exerting up to 100 pounds of force occasionally, and/or up to 50 pounds of force frequently and/or up to 20 pounds of force as needed to move objects.

**TERMS OF EMPLOYMENT:**

- Salary and benefits shall be paid consistent with the Board's approved salary schedule.
- Length of the work year and hours of employment shall be those established by the Board.

**EVALUATION:**

Performance of this job will be evaluated in accordance with provisions of the Board's policy on evaluation of personnel.

**Job Description Addendum No. 06**

Adopted: 7/20/10

**QUALIFICATIONS:**

- (1) Bachelors degree from an approved accredited educational institution.
- (2) Certified or qualified in accordance with Florida Statutes and State Board Rules.
- (3) Meet Federal Highly Qualified Guidelines, as applicable.

**Required Certificate(s):**

*(One or more are required to qualify for this position.)*

- Elementary Education (grades 1-6)
- Elementary Education (grades K-6)
- Emotionally Handicapped (grades K-12)
- Exceptional Student Education (grades K-12)
- Mentally Handicapped (grades K-12)
- Specific Learning Disabilities (grades K-12)
- Varying Exceptionalities (grades K-12)

APPENDIX B  
PARTICIPANT CONTACT INFORMATION

**Name:**

**Mailing Address:**

**Email Address:**

<b>Phone</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Best times to call</b>
<b>Home</b>		
<b>Cell</b>		
<b>Work</b>		

**Please indicate times I should avoid calling:**

**Please indicate preferred method for contacts.**

## APPENDIX C INFORMED CONSENT

Protocol Title: Negotiating the Role of Special Education Teacher in the Context  
Elementary Schools

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of the research study:

The purpose of this study is to examine how elementary school special education teachers understand, explain and enact their roles in schools that have implemented a multi-tiered system of supports .

What you will be asked to do in the study:

You are asked to participate in three in-depth interviews. In the first interview you will be asked to tell about your life up to this point as it relates to being a special education teacher, what brought you to this job, at this time, in this place. The second interview will ask you to describe your day to day work as a special education teacher. In the third interview you will be asked to reflect upon factors in your past and present that influence how you do your job as a special education teacher.

You will be asked to allow the researcher to shadow you on the job for one to two days, observing your work and recording activities.

Time required:

4.5 hours for interviews  
1to 2 school days to be shadowed

Risks and Benefits:

There is no more than minimal risk to you. Some people may experience discomfort at sharing personal information in an interview. There is no direct benefit to you. Some participants may appreciate the opportunity to reflect upon their work. The findings from this study may add to understanding of the work of special education teachers and may promote discussion of supports and challenges in the job.

Compensation:

You will receive a \$50.00 gift card to a local department store as a thank you for participating in this research.

Confidentiality:

Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Your information will be assigned a code number. The list connecting your name to this number will be kept in a locked file in my office. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report.

Voluntary participation:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating.

Right to withdraw from the study:

You have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime without consequence.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:

Elizabeth Filippi, Doctoral Candidate, School of Special Education, School Psychology, and Early Childhood Studies, 1403 Norman Hall, 352-538-4402

Jean Crockett, Ph.D, School of Special Education, School Psychology, and Early Childhood Studies, 1403 Norman Hall, PO Box 117050, Gainesville, FL 32611

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:

IRB02 Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, F 32611-2250  
Phone: 352-392-0433.

Agreement:

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure and I have received a copy of this description.

Participant:

Date:

Principal Investigator:

Date:

APPENDIX D  
PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW 1

Overall Theme: Personal beliefs and attitudes about teaching special education

Questions and prompts:

- 1) How did you come to be a special education teacher?
  - a. Early experiences that may have influenced your choice to become a teacher.
  - b. People that may have had an effect on how you think about teaching and how did they affect your beliefs?
  - c. Professional preparation?
    - i. College education and its relationship to what you do now
    - ii. Past work experiences, in or outside of education, have shaped where you are now?
- 2) What does it mean to be a special educator?
  - a. Professional standards and ethical principles in special education, such as those endorsed by CEC.
- 3) How much control do you believe you had over becoming a special education teacher?
  - a. How much was in others' control?
  - b. Whose opinions about your choice of work do you listen to?
- 4) What do you value about being a special educator?

APPENDIX E  
PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW 2

Overall Theme: What is the work that you do?

Questions and prompts:

- 1) What are your responsibilities as a special education teacher?
  - a. Who are you responsible to?
  - b. How do you decide who and what you are responsible for?
  
- 2) How do you decide what you are going to do each day?
  - a. Whose opinions about your choice of tasks do you listen to?
  - b. What rules/policies do you pay attention to when deciding what you do each day?
  
- 3) Tell me about:
  - Curriculum and Instruction
    - Instructional practices, assessment, planning, curricula
  - Managing the Learning Environment
    - Schedule, behavior, supports
  - Interactions with Students
  - Collaborating with Colleagues and Families
  - Other duties
  
- 4) How capable do you feel you are at carrying out your responsibilities (e. g., instructional practices, behavior management, assessment, collaboration, family interaction, paperwork)?

APPENDIX F  
PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW 3

Overall Theme: Influences in the local context

Questions and prompts:

- 1) Thinking back over the first interviews what connections surface?
  - a. Who and what influences what you do in your job?
  - b. What you pay attention to when deciding what you do each day?
- 2) How much control do you have over your ability to perform your job?
  - i. How do you exercise that control?
  - ii. What makes you think that you have that amount of control?
- 3) What do you think other people think of special education teaching as a profession?
- 4) What, if anything, do you think you would do differently if you worked in another school?
- 5) Is what you do what you think you should be doing?

APPENDIX G  
SPECIAL EDUCATORS' REPORTED TASKS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Problem solving</li> <li>Co-teaching</li> <li>Supervising students outside of class time</li> <li>IEP meetings</li> <li>LEA representative</li> <li>IEP development and paperwork</li> <li>Developing own schedule</li> <li>Paraprofessionals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developing schedule</li> <li>Train to task and curriculum</li> <li>Supervise</li> <li>Provide input for evaluation</li> </ul> </li> <li>Mentoring: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interns</li> <li>Novice teachers,</li> </ul> </li> <li>Teaching: reading, math, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Science content</li> <li>Modifying curriculum</li> <li>Alternative curricula</li> <li>Supplemental materials</li> </ul> </li> <li>Developing visual schedules</li> <li>Discovering/using adaptive devices</li> <li>Lesson planning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assigning grades</li> </ul> </li> <li>Assessment: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High Stakes</li> <li>Curriculum based</li> <li>Ongoing progress monitoring</li> <li>Accommodations</li> <li>Individualized</li> <li>Data Analysis</li> </ul> </li> <li>Consulting with teachers</li> <li>Participate on school level teams: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School Improvement</li> <li>Parent Involvement</li> <li>Grade Level</li> <li>Rtl</li> <li>PBS</li> </ul> </li> <li>Team leader</li> <li>Coordinate with: (Collaborate) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>University</li> <li>Researchers (Kurzweil)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>District ESE office</li> <li>Disability related agencies</li> <li>Managing behavior: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Classroom Systems</li> <li>Individualized Plans</li> <li>Functional behavioral assessment</li> <li>Behavioral Intervention Plans</li> </ul> </li> <li>Professional development: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participate in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lesson studies</li> <li>Book studies</li> <li>PLCs</li> <li>Learn general education curriculum</li> </ul> </li> <li>Provide for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Faculty</li> <li>Administrators</li> <li>Paraprofessionals</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>Sharing materials,</li> <li>Rtl: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Early intervening services</li> <li>Designing interventions</li> <li>Implementing interventions</li> <li>Tiers 2 &amp;3</li> </ul> </li> <li>Collaborating: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Administrators</li> <li>Teachers</li> <li>Agencies</li> <li>Data chats</li> </ul> </li> <li>Advocating for students</li> <li>Resource: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Administration</li> <li>Teachers</li> <li>Other special education professionals</li> </ul> </li> <li>Computer user <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tutoring</li> </ul> </li> <li>Interacting with parents</li> <li>Connection between home and school</li> </ul>
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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Elizabeth Ann-Marie Filippi was born in Poultney, Vermont. She earned a Bachelor of Science degree from George Peabody College for Teachers of Vanderbilt University in 1981. In 1999 she earned a Master of Education in special education from the University of Florida and then in 2008 earned a specialist in education, majoring in special education.

Dr. Filippi began her career teaching special education in Tennessee and Florida, then was employed with the State of Florida Departments of Developmental Services and Aging and Adult Services. She provided home intervention to families of infants and toddlers with sensory impairments, through the Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind. She has extensive experience delivering professional development to educators and related services professionals. In 1993 Dr. Filippi joined the faculty of Archer Community School where she served as a teacher in special education, general education and gifted education, as well as the Continuous Improvement Model facilitator. She is currently employed by the Alachua County Public Schools as a literacy coach.

Dr. Filippi earned her Ph.D in Special Education with an emphasis in administration and policy from the University of Florida in May of 2013.