

THE INFLUENCES OF THE TEXAS ACCOUNTABILITY RATINGS ON LOCAL  
PRACTICES IN A SUBURBAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL:  
A CASE STUDY APPROACH

by

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Abstract

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This case study explores the perspectives of stakeholders at a diverse, suburban elementary school regarding the Texas Educational Accountability Rating system. Specifically, it seeks to understand how they perceive the campus rating of Met Standard to have influenced the daily practices and campus culture of their school, and to understand what factors seem to have influenced the formation of these perceptions. Using the organizational theory of loose coupling as a lens, interviews with 15 participants provide a narrative that demonstrates how the campus rating negatively affects teacher stress levels and teacher morale. Realtor ratings are identified as a primary catalyst for low teacher morale, and punitive student consequences are identified as a primary catalyst for high teacher stress. However, high levels of efficacy and self-determination persist, largely due to the campus leader. A potential plan inspired by the work of the Texas Public Education Visioning Institute is set forth as appropriate next steps for creating transformative, positive change at the legislative level.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Over the past 30 years, policymakers at both the state and federal levels have demonstrated a growing concern for the education of students in U.S. public schools. With the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), the federal government began its course toward educational accountability legislation with more oversight, passing the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education act, and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, both of which are seen by many as a turning point in the accountability movement (Hanushek & Raymond, 2005; Hursh, 2005; Hursh, 2007; Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002; McDermott, 2007). In this national movement toward data-driven decision-making, scores from state-mandated tests have become the means for identifying low-performing schools and districts (Amerin & Berliner, 2002; Bejar & Graf, 2010; Booher-Jennings, 2005; Plank & Condliffe, 2013). It is with increasing trepidation that the educational research community views this new era of educational accountability (Holme, Richards, Jimerson, & Cohen, 2010; Loveless, Costrell, & Cuban, 2005; Ormell, 2011; Perna & Thomas, 2009; Ullucci & Spencer, 2009); but amidst national discourse on the subject, legislation has continued to move forward.

#### Statement of the Problem

In a time of growing accountability for schools and educators, the concept of the school rating has become a commonplace element in state and federal accountability systems. In Texas, for example, parents, teachers, and administrators knew their schools as Exemplary, Recognized, Acceptable, or Unacceptable for over a decade (Texas Education Agency, 2004-2013 Accountability Manuals). It was not uncommon to see a banner displayed, or a flag flying in the schoolyard identifying a Recognized school or an

Exemplary school district. While it may be unusual to see banners or flags declaring ratings of Acceptable or Unacceptable, that information is still readily available, as the Texas Education Code has long required its public schools and school districts to publish their rating information (Texas Education Agency, 2006-2014 Accountability Manuals). These school and district ratings are based on a multitude of factors, but it is important to consider whether any number of quantitative indicators can be enough to determine whether a school or district is truly Exemplary or Unacceptable.

A state policy has been enacted which publicly rates every single public school in Texas. There are over 8,000 Texas public schools and over 5,000,000 students enrolled in those schools (Texas Education Agency, 2014 Pocket Edition Issues). At a time when educational accountability policy is continually re-visited by the state legislative body, there is value in developing a deep understanding of the system that is in place.

Research has shown both negative and positive results in student performance stemming from accountability policies. Hanushek and Raymond (2005) found that over a 10-year period, student performance on the National Assessment of Academic Progress (NAEP) in states with consequences tied to accountability policy did improve across the board, but that white student achievement grew more than Hispanic or African American student achievement. Thus, it appears that the accountability policies in place only served to widen the achievement gap. In contradiction to these findings, Lauen and Gaddis (2012) found that struggling student population groups within 1.7 million students in North Carolina experienced statistically significant increases in their standardized test scores if they attended schools that faced potential consequences for low student achievement. Thus, at these schools, the accountability policy seems to have brought about a change in student academic performance.

In addition, accountability policies affect the way that the public perceives the education system. Beginning in 2001, the No Child Left Behind legislation authorized the federal accountability system of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) which rated all schools as either Met AYP or Did Not Meet AYI. With this rating came a series of reports that are designed to explain to the public how the school is performing. Jacobsen, Snyder, and Saultz (2014) explain how this reporting, in collaboration with all of the other reports issued with campus data, can affect public perception of local schools and of the public education system. They found that multiple reporting formats often cause confusion, leading stakeholders to disregard published data and develop a general distrust of the education system. At the teacher level, Louis, Febey, and Schroeder (2005) determined that the way teachers react and adapt to accountability policy is strongly influenced by the actions of their campus and district administrators, or district and campus policies related to educational accountability. One of the guiding principles for their research was that the perspectives and perceptions of the local stakeholders were key in understanding the effects of the accountability policy.

#### Purpose of the Study

This dissertation is a policy study, examining the implementation of the Texas educational accountability rating policy at Valoma Elementary School (VES)<sup>1</sup>, a diverse, suburban public elementary school located in the Central Texas Consolidated Independent School District (CTCISD). The purpose of this research is to examine the perceptions of stakeholders (i.e. district and campus level administrators, teachers, and parents/guardians) regarding the Texas accountability ratings. Using a case study methodological approach, this dissertation explores the VES stakeholders' experiences

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of the participants, school, district, and city associated with this study.

and perceptions about the ability of the rating to shape the daily practices and campus culture after its release, and the factors that seem to influence those perceptions. The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What are the perceptions of the Valoma Elementary School stakeholders regarding the influence of the Texas accountability rating on the daily practices and culture of their campus?
2. What seems to influence the formation of the Valoma Elementary School stakeholders' perceptions?

Because this research seeks to discover “how” or “why,” does not require behavior control in order to conduct research, and focuses on contemporary events, a case-study design is appropriate (Yin, 2009). The source of data is interviews with Valoma Elementary School staff, including: (a) the principal and assistant principal, (b) eight full-time teachers (c) two full-time language acquisition specialists, and (d) the parent of one current Valoma student. Additionally, interviews were conducted with the superintendent and one of the assistant superintendents.

The theoretical lens utilized for this study stems from Weick's (1976) work on Loosely Coupled Systems, which is the organizational theory that identifies situations where elements are responsive to one another, but still retain evidence of separateness and their own identity. Weick (1976) contended that studying the educational organization as a Loosely Coupled System can have a substantial effect on existing perceptions about the organization. The purpose of using this lens is to provide additional depth and consideration for findings that emerge from the study of stakeholders' perceptions. At the micro level, campus stakeholders benefit from gaining additional clarity around key policies, such as state accountability ratings, and from better understanding the ways those policies can shape the campus. At the macro level, it is

only through a stronger understanding of the relationship between policy and practice that we can consistently begin to make system-wide improvements in our education system.

### Organization of the Dissertation

This introduction briefly covers the larger dilemma of educational accountability policy and its affect on local practice. Specifically, this research seeks to add to the current body of research on how educational accountability policy affects local practice, by deeply understanding how stakeholders at a diverse, suburban elementary school perceive the state accountability rating affects the daily activities and campus culture of their elementary campus. In Chapter 2, the literature review covers the current state and federal accountability policies in place right now for students in Texas public schools, and also addresses the current state of research on this subject from the national, state, and local perspectives, focusing specifically on studies that seek to evaluate how educational accountability policy has affected student performance, and/or local practice (such as teacher motivations, actions, etc.). For Chapter 3, I discuss the use of Weick's (1976) loosely coupled systems, and the idea that this particular lens may assist in providing a deeper understanding of the relationship between policy and practice. Chapter 4 provides an in-depth overview of the research methods used for this study, including details about the use of case-study methodology, the site, sample, data collection and analysis techniques, trustworthiness strategies, and the researcher's role.

The findings of this study are outlined in the final three chapters. Chapter 5 includes a brief introduction to the school district and school, and identifies the findings associated with the first research question. Chapter 6 discusses the findings related to the second research question, and chapter seven closes the dissertation with the significance of the study, and implications for policy, practice, and research.

## Chapter 2

### Review of Relevant Literature

Both the state and the federal governments evaluate Texas public K-12 schools annually. This dissertation is focused on stakeholders' understandings of the current Texas accountability rating system. In order to ensure complete clarity around the research questions, this chapter begins with a review of the federal and state accountability systems, the state assessments that provide data for these accountability systems, and an explanation of the state accountability rating mechanism. Immediately following is a brief review of literature regarding educational accountability research; specifically, how accountability policies affect local practice. The selected studies that focus on the national scope are discussed first, followed by research conducted at the state level, and finally, studies at the local level focusing on the campus or school district are reviewed.

#### Federal and State Accountability Systems

Federal and state accountability systems both rely on the use of a rating or designation (or lack thereof) to denote a school's performance on a pass/fail scale. For federal accountability purposes, Texas schools either receive no designation or are identified as a Focus School or a Priority School. Focus Schools are the lowest 10% of Texas schools served by Title I, identified as having the widest gaps between student group performances on state-mandated exams. Priority Schools are the lowest 5% of Texas schools served by Title I, identified as having the lowest performance on state-mandated exams in reading and math (Texas Education Agency, 2013-14 Federal Report Card Definitions for Texas Public Schools, 2015).

Meanwhile, the state accountability policy in Texas assigns a rating to all public schools—either Met Standard, or Met Alternative Standard, or Improvement Required

(Texas Education Agency, 2014 Accountability Manual, 2014). Scores on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR), student participation rates on the STAAR tests, student attendance rates, dropout rates, and graduation rates determine state accountability ratings (Texas Education Agency, 2014 Accountability Manual, 2014). Information is compiled in four indices, each with a required performance target: (a) student achievement, (b) student progress, (c) closing performance gaps, and (d) postsecondary readiness. A campus must meet the required performance target of every index in order to achieve the rating of Met Standard. If a campus fails to meet the target in any of these indices, the school's rating will be Improvement Required.

#### *Evolution of Federal Accountability System*

President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act was originally passed by Congress as a part of the War on Poverty initiative, and is still the primary federal legislation affecting K-12 public education today (Texas Education Agency, No Child Left Behind/Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 2014). The 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), enacted a federally mandated accountability system known as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Transition into quote. "Under NCLB, accountability provisions that formerly applied only to districts and campuses receiving Title I funds now apply to all districts and campuses" (2012 AYP Guide, 2012, p. 11) and the criteria for this evaluation is determined each year through a plan submitted to and approved by the United States Department of Education. From 2003-2012, all Texas public schools received a federal accountability rating of Met AYP or Not Met AYP (Texas Education Agency, AYP Guides 2003-2012). After nearly a decade with these two ratings for all schools, the 2009 Texas Legislature passed House Bill 3, which called for a major re-

design of future Texas assessments and accountability policy. Because federal accountability is designed to correspond with state assessments, the federal system was re-designed to complement the new assessments and accountability system. Thus, the new designations of Focus Schools and Priority Schools began with the 2013-2014 school year (Texas Education Agency, 2014 Accountability System Frequently Asked Questions, 2014; Texas Education Agency, 2013-2014 Federal Report Card Definitions for Texas Public Schools, 2014).

#### *Evolution of State Accountability System*

Although the initial steps toward educational accountability taken by the federal government in 1965 pre-date the 1979 Texas legislation enacting the state-mandated exams, the Texas educational accountability system has been more robust in its movement towards data-driven decision-making over the past 35 years. Following is a brief history of Texas assessment and accountability. In 1979, the 66th Texas Legislature implemented a series of exams required for students in grades 3, 5, and 9 to test the basic competencies of students in reading, writing, and math. That test, called the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABS) was replaced in 1986 by the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS), which was the first exam students were required to pass in order to receive a Texas high school diploma (Texas Education Agency, 2012-2013 Technical Digest, 2014).

The 1990 implementation of the Texas Assessments of Academic Skills (TAAS) saw the expansion of state-mandated testing to students in grades 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11 in reading, writing, and math. Only three years later the TAAS program was expanded yet again; grades 3-8 and 10 were assessed in reading and math, grades 4, 8, and 10 were assessed in writing, and grade 8 was assessed in science and social studies. All tests in

grade 10 were required for graduation (Texas Education Agency, 2012-2013 Technical Digest, 2014).

In 1994 a rating system was introduced and schools could achieve one of four possible ratings – Exemplary, Recognized, Acceptable, or Low-Performing (Texas Education Agency, Accountability Manuals 1994-2002). Spanish-language tests were added for grades 3-6, the Reading Proficiency Tests in English (RPTE) were added to evaluate the progress of grade 3-12 English Language Learners in 2000, and in 2001 the State-Developed Alternate Assessments (SDAA) were introduced for students served by special education (Texas Education Agency, 2012-2013 Technical Digest, 2014).

In 2002, the Texas Assessments of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) replaced the TAAS tests, and for the first time, grade promotion in the lower grades became contingent upon passing the test, beginning with grade 3 students in 2003. In 2004, the accountability system slightly altered its campus rating system, changing the names of the bottom two ratings; Acceptable became Academically Acceptable, and Low-Performing became Academically Unacceptable (Texas Education Agency, 2004 Accountability Manual, 2004). Beginning in 2005, students in the 5th grade had to pass their tests in order to promote to grade 6, and beginning in 2008, students in the 8th grade had to pass their tests in order to promote to grade 9 (Texas Education Agency, 2012-2013 Technical Digest, 2014).

In 2011, students in grades 3-8 transitioned to the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR), which replaced the TAKS tests, and students in grades 9 began taking the first set of STAAR-End of Course (EOC) exams. For the first time, high school students were assessed as they finished specific required courses, instead of taking a more generic, grade-level test (Texas Education Agency, 2012-2013 Technical Digest, 2014).

Finally, because the assessments for English Language Learners (ELLs) and students served by Special Education have seen extensive change throughout this entire period of accountability expansion, and because they have played an ever-growing part in the way accountability is calculated, it is important to note the changes made in these two areas of assessment. Major developments occurred between 2004 and 2008 that affected the assessment of ELLs – the Texas Observation Protocol (TOP) assessment program was added to the RPTE in order to create the complete Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS), and the Linguistically Accommodated Testing (LAT) was created as an alternate assessment to the Math TAKS for recent immigrant English Language Learners in grades 3-8 and 10 (Texas Education Agency, 2012-2013 Technical Digest, 2014). In the assessment of students served by Special Education, a number of changes took place between 2005 and 2009 – the SDAA II replaced the SDAA in 2005, and in 2006 the assessment changed once again to become the TAKS-Inclusive (TAKS-I), only to end up as the TAKS-Accommodated (TAKS-A) in 2008; also in 2008, the TAKS-M (TAKS-M) and TAKS-Alternate (TAKS-Alt) were added to the selection of available tests for students served by Special Education (Texas Education Agency, 2012-2013 Technical Digest, 2014).

#### *Current Texas Accountability Ratings*

Each of these assessment changes was accompanied by updates to the state educational accountability system, the Texas Administrative Code and/or Texas Administrative Code (Texas Education Agency, 2012-2013 Technical Digest, 2014). The accountability rating calculation procedures change each year. Most years, the changes largely reflect a number of technical modifications made to ensure better clarity of data. However, during years where major changes occur in order to meet the requirements of new educational accountability legislation, technical and policy advisory groups

comprised of state and local politicians, school and district administrators, teachers, and business leaders work together to provide feedback on the accountability policies for the Texas Education Agency, and a plan is submitted to the Texas Commissioner of Education for final approval (Texas Education Agency, 1994-2014 Accountability Manuals). Because the depth and complexity of these accountability rating policies are vast and change from year to year, the following section will skip directly to a delineation of the current state accountability rating policy, as described in the 2014 Accountability Manual (Texas Education Agency, 2014).

#### Index descriptions

The 2014 Texas educational accountability rating system issues a Met Standard or Improvement Required rating to every campus. There is also a Met Alternative Standard rating available to campuses that do not meet the criteria of a traditional school, such as charter schools or alternative campuses. (Texas Education Agency, 2014 Accountability Manual, 2014). The rating determination is made based on a campus' performance within four separate indices: (a) student achievement, (b) student progress, (c) closing performance gaps, and (d) postsecondary readiness. Each index has a performance target – a campus must meet the performance target in all four areas in order to achieve the rating of Met Standard.

Index 1, Student Achievement, calculates the percentage of students who passed their STAAR exam(s) by using both the total number of tests taken, and the total number of tests passed. The target for Index 1 is 55 - in other words, 55% of the state-mandated exams taken by students in the school must have a passing score (Texas Education Agency, 2014 Accountability Manual, 2014). Index 1 is the only index with a performance target that is a simple percentage calculation. All other indices are determined using complex, statewide calculations and scales.

Index 2, Student Progress, calculates the growth students make over the course of one year, meaning it uses not only the most recent test score, but also the previous year's test score in addition. Only students with at least two test scores are counted in this index. The target score for Index 2 is different for elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools, and is "based on the 5th percentile of Index 2 outcomes based on the 2014 performance results by campus type" (Texas Education Agency, 2014 Accountability Manual, 2014). The percentage of students who met or exceeded growth for both the overall student population, and each individual student population category, is added up, and is calculated against the total number of points the campus could have amassed if all students had exceeded their growth expectation. (Texas Education Agency, 2014 Accountability Manual, 2014).

For index 3, Closing Performance Gaps, the percentages of students who meet standard from both the economically disadvantaged student group and the lowest-performing race/ethnicity student group are added up, and are calculated against the total number of points the campus could have amassed if all students in those groups had passed their exams (Texas Education Agency, 2014 Accountability Manual, 2014). Like index 2, the target score is different for elementary, middle, and high school, and is derived from statewide results, based on the 5th percentile of outcomes for this particular index.

Finally, Index 4, Postsecondary Readiness, uses percentages of student performance at the higher passing rate of "Final Panel Recommendation Level II" to determine a target score for elementary and middle schools. The percentage of students who met this higher passing rate for the overall student population and for each individual student population category is added up and is calculated against the total number of points the campus could have amassed if all students had met this higher passing rate

(Texas Education Agency, 2014 Accountability Manual, 2014). The target for elementary schools for this index is 12. For high schools, the calculation of this index also includes percentages of students on higher-level graduation plans, percentages of college-ready graduates, and graduation rates (Texas Education Agency, 2014 Accountability Manual, 2014).

#### Distinction designations

Campuses who achieve an accountability rating of Met Standard are eligible to receive distinction designations above and beyond their rating based on how they compare against 40 other schools with closely matching profiles. This group of 40 schools is known as the campus comparison group (Texas Education Agency, 2014 Accountability Manual, 2014). There are seven distinction designation categories that a campus can be recognized for: (a) postsecondary readiness, (b) top 25% student progress, (c) top 25% closing performance gaps, (d) academic achievement in reading, (e) academic achievement in math, (f) academic achievement in science, and (g) academic achievement in social studies.

The distinction designation for Post-Secondary Readiness is awarded to schools in the top 25% of their campus comparison group for performance at the higher passing rate on all STAAR exams. For this distinction designation, high school campuses also have indicators that include SAT/ACT performance, graduation rate and graduation plan percentages, and completion of advanced courses such as dual enrollment, international baccalaureate, and advanced placement courses. In order to receive the distinction designation for Top 25% Student Progress and for Top 24% Closing Performance Gaps, a campus must rank in the top quartile of their campus comparison group on both Index II and Index III using the index score as a rank (Texas Education Agency, 2014 Accountability Manual, 2014). Finally, the four academic achievement distinctions

(reading, math, science, and social studies) utilize indicators from the associated state-mandated exam, including attendance rate, greater than expected student growth, and percentage of students who perform at the higher passing rate. For elementary and middle schools, a campus must be ranked in quartile 1 or 2 within their campus comparison group for at least 50% of the applicable indicators (Texas Education Agency, 2014 Accountability Manual, 2014).

#### System safeguards

In addition to the indices and distinction designations, there is a system safeguard to ensure that campuses meet the needs of all student groups in all accountability indicators, and that poor performance for one student group is not masked within the index framework. Additionally, the system safeguards are used by the federal accountability system to identify Priority Schools and Focus Schools, among other required federal reporting (Texas Education Agency, 2014 Accountability Manual, 2014). For every tested subject area and every student population group, there is a 55% achievement floor for state accountability—any student group drops that below the 55% passing rate is flagged as a missed safeguard (Texas Education Agency, 2014 Accountability Manual, 2014). For all math and reading exams, there is an additional 79% safeguard that applies for federal accountability. There is a 95% floor for participation rate on the exams, an 80% floor for 4-year graduation rates, an 85% floor for 5-year graduation rates, and a 1% and 2% cap on alternative and modified assessments given to students served by special education. There are 117 possible safeguards total; the number of safeguards applicable at any particular campus is based on student populations, and tested subject areas and grade levels (Texas Education Agency, 2014 Accountability Manual, 2014).

### *Texas Accountability Intervention System*

Consequences and interventions are addressed within the Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS) for schools that meet any of the following criteria: (a) identified as a Focus School or a Priority School under the federal accountability system, and/or (b) identified as Improvement Required under the Texas accountability policy, and/or (c) any school that misses any of their applicable safeguard targets. TAIS is managed by the Program Monitoring and Interventions (PMI) Division of the Texas Education Agency, and this system helps PMI to “determine the level of intervention and support the campus or district receives based on performance history as well as current year state accountability rating and performance on the safeguard measures” (Texas Education Agency, 2014 Accountability Manual, p. 80). Although the level of intervention varies based on campus performance, all interventions require the formation of a campus intervention team as well as the designation of a district coordinator of school improvement (Texas Education Agency, Campus Accountability Identification and Required Intervention, 2014). The district must engage the services of a professional service provider from a list of approved individuals, who serve to assist in the process, and ensures that all school improvement requirements are met and reported as required (Texas Education Agency, Professional Service Provider [PSP] Job Description, 2014). Campuses who spend more than one year in the TAIS process undergo the campus reconstitution process, which includes steps for removing the principal and certain teachers (Texas Education Agency, TAKS Reconstitution Presentation, 2014).

### *Purpose of Index System as an Accountability Framework*

The previous Texas educational accountability system with four ratings (1994-2011) was calculated using up to 25 baseline indicators (five subject area tests for five student population groups), along with many additional statistical calculations added

through the years to ensure data reliability and system fairness (Texas Education Agency, 1994-2011 Accountability Manuals). In 2009, House Bill 3 from the Texas Legislature required numerous additional measures that would have pushed the framework to house over 100 different indicators, which made necessary the design of a new accountability framework. The Accountability Policy Advisory Committee and the Accountability Technical Advisory Committee selected the performance index framework because it “allows educators and the public to understand how their district or campus is performing on four indexes. The accountability reports provide an easy-to-understand summary of each school’s performance on each index” (Texas Education Agency, 2014 Accountability System Frequently Asked Questions, 2014).

#### Educational Accountability Research

Within the field of educational research, there is a thriving body of work focused on accountability policy. In order to collect the most relevant series of literature for this particular study, research articles with a particular focus on the relationship between policy and practice were chosen. The results are largely inconclusive as to how policy affects practice, and what kind of a difference it has made in student performance. Some research recognizes a positive relationship between accountability sanctions and academic achievement for minority and disadvantaged students in low-performing schools, while other studies find that accountability policy can cause the achievement gap to widen. An eight-year study in North Carolina utilizing state-mandated test scores from 1.7 million students found that the struggling student population groups identified by the federal accountability measures, or Adequate Yearly Progress, experienced statistically significant increases in their standardized test scores, especially if they attended low-performing schools who faced potential sanctions (Lauen & Gaddis, 2012). However, a 10-year study of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

scores by Hanushek and Raymond (2005) found the opposite effect. States with consequences tied to accountability policy demonstrated a positive impact on student test performance over time, but their results in closing the achievement gap were less conclusive. While African American, Hispanic, and White students all made gains in test performance, the White students made more gains than African American students, causing the achievement gap to widen.

One thing that does seem to be clear is that states with high-stakes policies seem to have a larger impact on local practice, whether it be positive or negative (Jackson & Lunenburg, 2010; Ullucci & Spencer, 2009). At the local level, available research indicates that teacher motivation, and sometimes their actions, are affected by accountability policy (Finnigan & Gross, 2007; Sloan, 2007). Additionally, teachers are concerned about the impact of accountability policy on student performance (Klinger & Rogers, 2011; Sloan, 2007). However, as one study notes, teacher motivation and actions could perhaps be the same regardless of accountability policy, and research into accountability policy is merely revealing them for what they are (Sloan 2007). Following is a brief selection from the accountability policy field highlighting the implications at the national level, at the state level, and at the local level.

#### *National and International Impact*

Since the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, otherwise known as NCLB, the federal accountability system of AYP has levied sanctions against campuses with continually-underperforming student groups (2012, AYP Guide). And yet, in a meta-analysis reviewing accountability policies that NCLB was founded on, Lee (2008) noted only a mildly positive effect in overall student achievement due to accountability policy, and no significant effect on narrowing the achievement gap. This research included a combined 76 effect-size estimates from 14 different studies that were

(a) primarily examining the effectiveness of state-level accountability policies in states with high-stakes testing, (b) addressing achievement in reading and/or math as a dependent variable, and (c) utilizing data from state-wide or national databases, thus allowing for generalization to the full student population. Lee (2008) also highlighted concerns for large-scale studies used in the decision-making process for accountability policy, primarily relating to the vast possibilities of variables that are the actual cause of change. As an example, accountability policies often apply sanctions to multiple stakeholder groups in different ways—schools can lose funding, students can be prevented from promoting to the next grade, etc. Studies often fail to separate the policies and examine their effects separately.

While Lee (2008) highlighted the possible reasons for the lack of statistical significance in large-scale accountability research through the lens of research methodology, Ormell (2011) pointed to the assessments themselves as a root cause underlying recurring concerns around accountability policy. In a succinct review of the cycle of student assessment, public score release, parent reaction, and assessment re-design, Ormell characterizes the current state of educational accountability as deeply problematic. He noted that part of the cycle in designing accountability policies is addressing the complaint of poor test validity with increasing the number and frequency of exams. In return, when stakeholders voice concern, they are given the recurring answer that “there is no alternative” (p. 29). However, he does see light at the end of the tunnel if educational organizations transition towards a much more meaningful, and much more expensive assessment system of evaluating the student’s ability to make sense of a new situation. Specifically, Ormell suggests replacing the current fact-based questions on multiple-choice exams with performance-based tasks that require students to use their knowledge to problem-solve in the moment. He proposes redesigning a system that

would center around examination panels who have prepared thousands of different scenarios to present to students through movie or animation clips, pictures, photographs, etc. that are “challenging but understandable” and have been vetted by both assessment experts and test groups (p. 31).

Ormell's (2011) suggestion of re-designing the assessment model from the ground up would likely bring change to every aspect of current accountability policies, including the way individual student assessment information and campus testing scores are released to the public. Jacobsen, Snyder, and Saultz (2014) assert that even this aspect of accountability, the way that data are released to the public, heavily influences the public perception of satisfaction with the overall educational system. They identify the cycle of public perception shaping politics, which sets the course for accountability policy, which influences assessment and data release, which affects public perception. Utilizing publicly-released school-performance ‘report cards’ with accountability information from 50 different states and nine major cities, Jacobsen, Snyder, and Saultz (2014) surveyed a panel of over 1000 participants representative of the U.S. population to determine how data formats altered individual perception of school performance. All 59 data reports fell into one of four categories of data formatting: (a) performance index rating, (b) letter grade, (c) percent meeting goal, and (d) achievement level (i.e. ratings). They found that the letter grade style of accountability reporting caused participants to perceive a larger quality gap between the schools, while the performance index style of accountability reporting caused participants to perceive that schools with different scores were generally performing similarly. Additionally, their research sought to understand how multiple reporting formats affect the participants’ perceptions of campus performance. For example, some cities and districts release their own reports in addition to state- and federal-mandated accountability reports. Jacobsen, Snyder, and Saultz (2014) found that

the reports were often interpreted differently, leading to confusion and complete disregard for all accountability information, resulting in a lack of trust for the educational system. It is important to note that in the state of Texas, there are currently 13 different annual campus reports available for download at the Texas Education Agency Performance Reporting website (Texas Education Agency, Performance Reporting Division).

### *State Impact*

Both Mississippi and Tennessee require a social studies test for graduation and utilize the test results for campus accountability, and both tests were implemented within one year of each other. The two states have similar graduation rates, average teacher salaries, student-teacher ratios, and both are at the bottom of the national per-student-expenditure rate. However, the Mississippi end-of-course exam has significantly higher stakes than the Tennessee exam. A comparison study conducted with 107 teachers from 55 schools in Mississippi, and 115 teachers from 53 schools in Tennessee, revealed that high-stakes accountability policies influenced the instructional practices of the teachers, while those in a low-stakes accountability state made their instructional practice decisions based on personal experience (Vogler, 2008). However, this research did not seek to understand whether or not the change in teacher practices resulted in higher student performance on the exams.

Researchers in Texas, however, did study specific indicators of student success, and compared them to school ratings to evaluate whether or not the rating system would hold up under scrutiny as an agent for advancing student achievement. By studying academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and organizational structures, Jackson and Lunenburg (2010) found that Texas schools with the different accountability ratings of Exemplary, Recognized, Academically Acceptable, and Academically Unacceptable, did remain separate in a statistically significant way. Their

findings were consistent with the earlier research of Levine and Lezotte (1990), Purkey and Smith (1983), and Scheerens and Bosker (1997) on effective performance indicators. Jackson and Lunenburg (2010) further note that these four factors – academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and organizational structures – can influence teacher beliefs that lead to student achievement.

However, these results contrast sharply with a study by Ullucci and Spencer (2009), who delineate a series of goals used to design high-stakes testing and accountability in California, which are then carefully deconstructed using research studies. The original goals of the California High School Exit Exams (CAHSEE) were to a) ensure that the California diploma was grade appropriate, b) to increase student achievement, and c) to close the achievement gap. However, the California Department of Education's response is inherently flawed, as it "[relies] on standardization to foment change in education. This system is predicated on the belief that if all inputs are similar (a standard curriculum), then the outcomes should also be similar (higher performance on tests)" (p. 170). Thus, the original goals of the CAHSEE were not met.

In a study examining stakeholder groups that influence accountability policy design and how those groups shape accountability policy, Salinas and Reidel (2007) identify the Texas business elite as a powerful force advocating high-stakes accountability. Although they note that the influential business lobby initially began exploring accountability legislation in order to improve the future workforce, they look with concern upon the relationship between the business elite and the large corporations that profit from large-scale state-mandated testing. Additionally, they point to the overarching philosophical issue that this influence over legislative decisions undermines the purpose of the democratic system. Transition into quote. "With the enactment of the business elite's accountability agenda, the state becomes a false symbol of inclusion, no longer

representing more inclusive beliefs and values of its citizenry” (p. 52). Salinas and Reidel (2007) close with a discussion on the grassroots movements that began to grow alongside the tougher accountability sanctions, and the impact it began to have on state-wide politics in Texas. They note the major role of high-stakes testing and accountability in the rhetoric of the gubernatorial candidates of the 2006 election, citing high-stakes testing as a “popular and viable lightning rod for challenging political candidates” (p. 53). The eight years since the 2006 election have only strengthened the tone of this controversy; the 2014 election held the same topics aloft as key, but this time from the very start of the election (Ujifusa, 2013).

#### *Local Impact*

Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, Finnigan and Gross (2007) studied teachers’ perceptions of personal motivation and how those motivations changed in relation to accountability policy sanctions. Conducted in 10 low-performing elementary schools in Chicago, 133 teachers took part in 171 interviews and 11 focus groups. Additionally, in each of the 10 schools a survey was administered, with 269 participants taking part, at an 80% response rate. Using expectancy theory and incentive theory as a theoretical lens, the study was designed around the concepts of valence (or the desire for a particular outcome), expectancy (which is essentially self-efficacy), and three types of incentives—material incentives (which are tangible), purposive incentives (which are derived from satisfaction from achieving goals), and solidary incentives (which are derived from community membership).

Finnigan and Gross (2007) conducted their research between 1999 and 2001, five years after the Illinois Legislature passed the 1995 School Reform Act, which resulted in 25% of Chicago public schools being placed on probation for failing to meet the goal of 15% of students at grade level based on Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS)

aggregated results. The 10 elementary schools participating in the study were all placed on probationary status during the first two years of policy implementation, and the survey results demonstrated that “teachers who found the policy fair did not necessarily think the ITBS was a good indicator of their students’ performance” (Finnigan & Gross, 2007, p. 601). Qualitative results yielded a wide range of effects on teacher motivation, resulting in the authors’ conclusion that teachers’ internal motivations to bring about positive change for student achievement, while initially strong, were diminished by the accountability sanctions that labeled their schools as probationary.

Sloan’s (2007) research on the effects of high-stakes accountability for minority youth revealed a different perspective. First noting a body of ethnographic research that demonstrates how accountability policies have a negative influence on schools, Sloan (2007) contends that “the lack of clear counternarratives or counterexamples leaves underexplored the varied ways teachers experience and respond to accountability-focused policies” (p. 31). Based on this, and the fact that U.S. public education has historically underserved low-income and minority students, Sloan (2007) developed a series of elementary school teacher case studies that looked at teacher agency and accountability, in response to educational accountability policy. He was initially drawn to two teachers as possible examples of how accountability was creating a negative experience in the classroom.

One elementary school teacher, Christine, voiced concerns about how accountability had negatively affected her classroom instruction, noting a lack of freedom that held her back from providing more child-centered activities. However, over three years of observation, Sloan (2007) was never able to observe a qualitative difference between what Christine described as ‘positive’ instructional practices, and ‘negative’ instructional practices. She claimed she was forced to teach in a specific way, due to

strict policies put in place by her district to reach accountability goals, but upon observation of her in the classroom, the different instructional styles were not discernable. On the contrary, Sloan (2007) found that accountability forced Christine to have “more extended writing opportunities for the students in her class, opportunities that were sorely lacking before” (p. 32). So while accountability policy may not have altered her instructional methods, for better or for worse, it did change her content and her lesson planning.

Dean, the other teacher studied by Sloan (2007), was not concerned about accountability, or the district policies regarding accountability, like Christine. Instead, he continued in his way of teaching, which Sloan (2007) equated to “Bill Nye the Science Guy” in that he liked to draw his students in with engaging narrative and fun projects. However, long-term observations of Dean revealed that “his idiosyncratic teaching filled with fantastical exhibitions and entertaining demonstrations seemed to privilege the few Anglo children and to work against the greater number of English-language learners” (p. 33).

Sloan (2007) was able to gain a deeper understanding of the accountability system and draw conclusions that he may have missed without this extra time and observation. In this case, his conclusions were that the high-stakes accountability policies worked for the students, rather than against them.

Finally, Klinger and Rogers (2011) administered a survey to teachers in Alberta (n=359), and Ontario, Canada (n=859) seeking their perceptions of their low-stakes assessment programs (i.e. no immediate student or campus consequences). Specifically, they evaluated the teachers’ perceived knowledge of the assessment programs, the appropriateness of purposes and uses of the exam results and the reporting of the assessment results. They came to the conclusion that the comparison of

teachers, schools, and jurisdictions did not positively affect teaching and learning, even in this low-stakes environment.

They found that teachers were generally confident regarding their knowledge of the test, and were only mildly concerned with the curriculum issue of 'teaching to the test,' and test validity issues (overuse of multiple-choice items, and consistency of scoring from year to year). They rated the appropriateness of the test for its purpose and use consistently low, and they were "equally concerned with the use of the results to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers, publicly rank schools, and to serve as an accountability tool" (Klinger & Rogers, 2011, p. 136). Teachers also had a very high level of concern about the fact that the public does not know how to interpret what local media outlets and newspapers publish; the majority of teachers indicated that while principals and staff should receive disaggregated results broken down by student groups, that information should not be released publicly.

#### Relevancy to Dissertation Research

There is value in deeply understanding the impact of educational accountability policy on local practice. In an analysis of the state-level politics and accountability policy research, Loveless, Costrell and Cuban (2005) reflect upon the need for research to add to the body of literature available for policy-makers. "That accountability raises the stakes for teachers, students, and parents enhances the value of educational research. Indeed, accountability's long-term viability probably depends upon advances in research" (p. 27). They point out that it is necessary to know exactly what needs to be different in order for students to have a better chance at success. It is necessary to understand what a teacher needs to do differently, that they were not doing before, or exactly what a student needs to do differently, in order to learn, when their past learning behavior did not result in learning. "For both parties, perhaps it is as simple as trying harder. . . . If the

solution is not that simple, however, trying harder will lead to marginal gains. Greater gains will materialize only for those who know what to do” (p. 16). My dissertation, however small the scope, speaks to how the accountability rating policy affects the morale and stress level of the participants in this study, and I contend that those conditions affect teacher performance in the classroom, which affects student learning.

Louis, Febey, and Schroeder (2005) conducted a qualitative study in three high schools examining teachers’ responses to high-stakes accountability policy through the theoretical lens of sensemaking. Specifically, they studied how the schools adapted to accountability standards, how the school’s structure and culture related to the teachers’ ability to make sense of and respond to the standards, and how teacher perceptions of power relationships within the school culture affected their responses to accountability policy. Essentially, their research focused on ‘mediators’ that served as interpreters of the policy between the policy-making body (i.e. state legislature) and the implementers (i.e. teachers). Any number of district or campus administrative personnel, or district or campus policies, can serve as a ‘mediator;’ and this research identified several mediators that played a significant role in the way the teachers adapted to the accountability policy. “When teachers observed active attempts on the part of administrators to make sense of a policy and mold it to local conditions, they appear to be more willing to engage in the elaboration of its implications for their school and classroom” (Louis, Febey, & Schroeder, 2005, p. 200). This research was based on the assumption by Louis, Febey, and Schroeder (2005) that local stakeholders’ cognitive perspectives and perceptions are important keys to understanding the effects of accountability policy.

My dissertation adds to the current body of research looking at how policy affects practice, using a case study model at a diverse, suburban elementary school. It is valuable to study how local stakeholders perceive the state accountability ratings, and

how that perception might impact the daily activities and school culture of their campus. This study may help to provide policymakers with insight on local impact to better serve the students these policies are intended to assist. The research covered in this review of literature briefly demonstrates a wide range of aspects that reveal how policy affects local practice, highlighting student achievement, and teacher motivations and actions.

## Chapter 3

### Theoretical Framework

Both the state and the federal governments evaluate Texas public K-12 schools annually. This study will utilize the theoretical framework of Loosely Coupled Systems, which identifies situations where elements are responsive to one another, but retain evidence of separateness and their own identity (Weick, 1976). Weick (1976) states that “the concept of organizations as loosely coupled systems can have a substantial effect on existing perspectives about organizations” (p. 16). As new legislation becomes law and new policies are enacted, there is value in better understanding the important relationship between policy-makers and practitioners. This theoretical framework is an appropriate lens for this research topic because it provides deeper insight into this particular relationship.

#### Loosely Coupled Systems in Case Study Research

Orton and Weick (1990) note that the theoretical lens of loosely coupled systems may be able to assist researchers in studying “structure as something that organizations do, rather than merely as something they have” (p. 218). Coupling is evident when elements affect each other: (a) suddenly, rather than continually; (b) occasionally, rather than constantly; (c) negligibly, rather than significantly; (d) indirectly, rather than directly; and/or (e) eventually, rather than immediately (Orton & Weick, 1990). Additionally, Weick (1976) accepts the concept put forth by other researchers that the number of elements that two entities share determines the level of coupling; the higher the number of elements, or the more important the elements are, the tighter the level of coupling.

Case study as a research method lends itself well to the in-depth, careful analysis necessary to understanding and interpreting the juxtaposition often found in a loosely coupled system (Orton & Weick, 1990). Loose coupling is able to distinguish a

multitude of different structural dimensions, and recognizes their constant uncoupling and recoupling; its depiction of constantly changing connection invites researchers “to move more deeply into the human working, which underlie organizational structure” (p. 218). In studying how state accountability ratings are perceived to shape a school, the opportunity may be present to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships that drive our organizational structure, thereby enhancing the ways we drive student learning across the State of Texas.

Weick’s (1976) identifies a purposeful use of the term coupling, which is important when considering how to identify the level of coupling between different systems. He states:

It might seem that the word coupling is synonymous with words like connection, link, or interdependence, yet each of these latter terms misses a crucial nuance. By loose coupling, the author intends to convey the image that coupled events are responsive, but that each event also preserves its own identity and some evidence of its physical or logical separateness. (p. 3)

Thus, the entities, or systems, that are loosely coupled must be independent, and yet responsive to each other as well. This specificity is paramount to the theoretical framework, as the balance between independence and responsiveness of elements is a key identifier of loose coupling. A clear definition of this term, coupling, allows for greater understanding of Weick’s (1976) originally identified seven functions, or dysfunctions, of loose coupling.

#### Seven Functions, or Dysfunctions, of Loose Coupling

Weick (1976) described seven possible functions and dysfunctions of loose coupling that can serve to indicate its presence in different facets of the current U.S. K-12 educational structure. More specifically, they can identify aspects of loose coupling within the framework of educational policy, and educational practice. These characteristics are potential functions of loose coupling which can also serve as a liability,

depending on the situation (Weick, 1976). Following are the seven possible functions and dysfunctions, and below that a more detailed narrative description of each idea is given.

1. Some portions of an organization are allowed to persist
2. May provide a sensitive sensing mechanism
3. May provide a good system for localized adaptation
4. Potential to retain a great number of mutations and novel solutions
5. Can prevent the spread of serious problems that manifest in one part of the system
6. Leaves more room available for self-determination by the actors
7. Should be relatively inexpensive to operate

The first possible function, or dysfunction, of loose coupling is that it “allows some portions of an organization to persist. Loose coupling lowers the probability that the organization will have to—or be able to—respond to each little change in the environment that occurs” (Weick, 1976, p. 6). Today’s principals and superintendents in Texas public schools must contend with a series of state-mandated tests whose scores partially determine public ratings. Some principals and superintendents have taken the steps necessary to ensure, above all else, that enough students will pass the tests for the school to receive a high rating. In some cases this means that school funds are spent on products sold by vendors that provide teachers with pre-planned lessons covering curriculum that is sure to be on the test. In this situation, the school or school district would be tightly coupled with the policy-making body, as a change in the policy would have an immediate and drastic effect on the entire campus or district.

However, there are some schools and campuses that opt against focusing their curriculum around tested items, instead selecting a different curricular focus around

which all instruction is designed. The superintendents or principals who choose this path may do so for many possible reasons; a lack of faith in the curricular strength of the test, a belief that focus on the test is not enough to provide a comprehensive education for students, a reticence to change teaching methods long established, etc. Whatever the case, it is certain that the school whose curricular aims are not so tightly intertwined with those of the mandated test will experience a lower probability of responding to every little change set forth by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) or by the Texas Legislature, because they have designed their instruction around a different focus.

The second possible function, or dysfunction, of loose coupling, is that it “may provide a sensitive sensing mechanism” (Weick, 1976, p. 6). As an example, “sand is a better medium to display wind currents than are rocks, the reason being that sand has more elements, more independence among the elements, and the elements are subject to a greater amount of external constraint” (p. 6). Weick (1976) points out that loose coupling provides individuals with a stronger understanding of their environments, but that it also allows for more “faddish responses” (p. 6). Using the same example from above, in a school where a principal holds tight to curriculum based on a state-mandated test, little outside influence can bring about change in a teacher’s classroom. However, in an environment where a principal makes allowances for curricular influences from outside the scope of a test, there is much more of an opportunity for a teacher’s classroom to recognize the fads that come and go regarding instructional techniques.

The third possible function, or dysfunction, of loosely coupled system is that it “may be a good system for localized adaptation. If all of the elements in a large system are loosely coupled to one another, then any one element can adjust to and modify a local unique contingency” (Weick, 1976, p. 7). In a tightly coupled system, one element, or one school, may not be able to modify itself to better suit its own needs, but in a

loosely coupled system, localized adaptation is possible. Policy mandates for class sizes can be skipped over with a waiver; principals and superintendents can have their teachers focus instruction around a broad inquiry-based curriculum rather than a more finite, skill-based curriculum; the choice of how loosely the educational organization is coupled with the policy-making body lies with the leader of that organization. Schools and districts can opt to hold themselves close to the policy-making bodies, or they can choose otherwise if they desire.

The fourth possible function of a loosely coupled system is that it “potentially can retain a greater number of mutations and novel solutions than would be the case with a tightly coupled system” (Weick, 1976, p. 7). In a school district where the campuses have been allowed a great deal of freedom to develop plans to improve student achievement, some schools may stretch for out-of-the-box creative ideas for change with great success, ideas that would not have been possible within a tightly-regimented set of rules and procedures set forth by a school district (such as innovative use of student time which requires alteration to the master schedule, etc.). There could be a large number of schools within a system that find success in different and varied ways. The alternative dysfunction lies in the possibility that a school, or school district, can develop powerful systems to stimulate student learning, and that loose coupling, by its very nature, can preclude the advance of this benefit to other schools. Powerful learning systems that have the opportunity to grow at one school through freedom of choice cannot be automatically pushed out to all other schools in the system.

The fifth possible function, or dysfunction, of a loosely coupled system is that it can prevent the spread of serious problems that manifest in one part of the system; it is possible for the system to seal off that problematic area, and remain unaffected. However, Weick (1976) points out the opposing nature of this benefit, which is that the

lack of influence can prove fatal to the dysfunctional segment. Using the example above, if a school district has several schools that are flourishing, there may be other schools that are ailing. It may prove difficult for the ailing schools to see and understand what is bringing success to other campuses.

The sixth possible function, or dysfunction, of a loosely coupled system is that “there is more room available for self-determination by the actors” (Weick, 1976, p. 7). In a further expansion on this point, Weick (1976) notes that “a sense of efficacy might be greater in a loosely coupled system with autonomous units than it would be in a tightly coupled system where discretion is limited” (p. 8). Referring back to the example used in functions one and two above, it holds that a teacher at a campus where the principal allows for a broader approach to curriculum and instruction would be able to operate in a more autonomous fashion, thereby providing a greater sense of self-efficacy for that teacher. One potential drawback for an autonomous educator is the resulting responsibility for concerns with curriculum and instruction, in that they can no longer be passed along to the assigning body; rather, the teacher must now be able to answer questions to stakeholders regarding their lesson design and delivery.

The seventh and final possible function, or dysfunction, of a loosely coupled system is that it “should be relatively inexpensive to run because it takes time and money to coordinate people” (Weick, 1976, p. 8). In a school district that allows for creative design of campus plans for improving student achievement, there is potential for a wide variety of fiscal overhead between the plans, and it is possible for some schools to develop plans that are maintained at a low cost. However, there is also potential for campuses to develop high cost plans that do not have the desired affect, resulting in a great deal of financial waste.

### Relevance to this Study and Concluding Thoughts

In order to better understand the relationship between Texas educational accountability ratings and stakeholder perceptions around how ratings affect education, it is important to first have a better understanding of the overall systemic relationship between state policy and local practice. Weick's (1976) theoretical lens of loosely coupled systems proposes a series of possible functions and dysfunctions of systems that are loosely coupled. These functions and dysfunctions allow for a close inspection of our current system here in Texas, by providing a context for understanding the local response to state policies. Once a stronger understanding of this relationship is established, it is possible to ask deeper questions (and possibly gain deeper understandings) around how the state accountability ratings are directly affecting the everyday activities and campus culture of a school or a school district.

## Chapter 4

### Research Design

This dissertation uses a case-study design focused on one suburban elementary school, that provides perspectives from 15 individuals associated with the school district – two district administrators, two campus administrators, two language acquisition specialists, eight campus teachers, and a parent. The purpose behind this research is to better understand the relationship between the Texas accountability rating policy and local practice at a suburban elementary school. Participants' perspectives provide insight into policy application. The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the perceptions of the Valoma Elementary School stakeholders regarding the influence of the Texas accountability rating on the daily practices and culture of their campus?
2. What seems to influence the formation of the Valoma Elementary School stakeholders' perceptions?

Essentially, the goal of this study is to contribute to the body of literature focused on improving the educational experience of students; “through the use of adaptive research designs and contextual, rich stories, qualitative research can help to identify key factors that contribute to or hinder students' academic success” (Sallee & Flood, 2012, p. 140).

This study utilizes a qualitative research approach to develop an understanding of stakeholders' perceptions regarding state accountability ratings, specifically exploring the comparison between the school rating and the perceived influence the rating has upon the school. A qualitative approach was appropriate for this inquiry because it focuses on people and situations, it emphasizes words rather than numbers, and the findings were derived primarily from an inductive approach (Maxwell, 2005). Additionally, this study exhibits the five features of qualitative study laid out by Bogdan and Biklen

(2007): (a) the research was conducted in a naturalistic manner with interviews held primarily at the participants' place of work; (b) the data are descriptive, in the form of words instead of numbers; (c) concern for the process was held up as a meaningful part of the research study, in that great care was taken to develop understandings of participant perspectives; (d) data were analyzed using an inductive process, rather than seeking out data to prove or disprove a hypothesis; (e) the participant perspective is of the highest level of importance in this study, and the way that participants make meaning of the rating system is of essential concern.

#### Case Study as a Methodology

A case study approach is fitting for the purposes of exploring stakeholder understanding when the researcher has selected one area of focus, in this case the Texas accountability rating system, "then selects one bounded case to illustrate this issue" (Creswell, 2007, p. 74). Further, this research meets the three conditions suggested by Yin (2014) as appropriate for determining whether to utilize a case study methodology. The first condition is that the research question must seek to understand how or why, which suits this study in that the research questions pursue understanding around how the stakeholders perceive the assigned accountability rating to have shaped the campus, if at all. The second condition is that the researcher must not require the control of behavior events in order to conduct research; quite the opposite, the role of the researcher in this study is to seek greater understanding regarding perceptions of events that have already taken place. The third condition is that the case study must focus on contemporary events; as the first set of district and campus ratings were released for the newly developed accountability system on August 8, 2013, this research is appropriately focused on how current policies affect local practice (Texas Education Agency,

Accountability System Development Timeline, 2013; Texas Education Agency, Accountability Manual, 2013).

This research is valuable because it allows for a deep understanding, in one specific case, of the different ways in which the Texas accountability rating is perceived to have shaped the culture of an elementary school. Additionally, it allows for the opportunity to have a complete comprehension of how different stakeholders perceive the ratings themselves; both in terms of understanding the rating, and in terms of how those stakeholders value the rating. Case study research allows for “the development of a nuanced view of reality, including the view that human behavior cannot be meaningfully understood as simply as the rule-governed acts found at the lowest levels of the learning process” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 223).

#### Site Selection

This case study considers the perspectives of stakeholders at a public elementary school in the Central Texas Consolidated Independent School District (CTCISD), a mid-size school district in North Central Texas with an accountability rating of “Met Standard.” CTCISD has over 50,000 students, almost half of whom are white, and more than a quarter are Hispanic. Of this student body, 14% of the students are English Language Learners and 30% are classified as economically disadvantaged. Valoma Elementary School is located in CTCISD and serves a population of students that are 55% Hispanic, 26% white, 11% African American, 5% Asian, and 3% who are two or more races. In a school with nearly 600 students, 32% are English Language Learners, and 67% are classified as economically disadvantaged. The teaching staff is 91% female; 73% are white, 22% are Hispanic, and 5% are African American. Valoma Elementary School was selected for this study because of its diverse population, and its success in achieving the “Met Standard” rating. Often, schools with diverse populations

struggle to achieve a passing rating on an accountability policy, more than their predominantly white counterparts do (Reback, 2008).

#### Participant Selection

The participants who were interviewed for this study include two district-level administrators from CTCISD, the Valoma principal and assistant principal, two Valoma language acquisition specialists who provide instructional support to teachers, eight Valoma teachers, and the parent of one Valoma student. The eight Valoma teachers who were interviewed consisted of one kindergarten teacher, two second-grade teachers, two third-grade teachers, two fourth-grade teachers, and the art teacher. Due to scheduling circumstances, the two language acquisition specialists were interviewed together at the same time. Thus, there are 15 participants, and 14 interviews.

The position of the language acquisition specialists is closer to the role of a teacher than an administrator. Language acquisition specialists are instructional support specialists, and their job requires sufficient classroom experience and success with English Language Learners, but is not evaluative and does not require an administrative certificate. They assist in data-disaggregation, lesson planning, professional learning, and often support teachers in the classroom one-on-one. Additionally, the contract of a language acquisition specialist is the same as a teacher – the same amount of pay and the same amount of days. For the purposes of reducing confusion, I will refer to language acquisition specialists as teachers when referencing these participants in chapter four of this paper. In chapters five, six, and seven, I will identify the specific roles of participants when I refer to them, and will differentiate between teachers and language acquisition specialists.

The two district-level administrators, selected specifically for their scope of oversight, are the superintendent and the assistant superintendent. CTCISD has several

assistant superintendents; the assistant superintendent interviewed for this study oversees the daily functions of each school in the district, and all student activities. Each of these participants possesses extensive campus-level and district-level experience, and their current leadership roles allow for a greater perspective in observing how campus accountability ratings affect schools.

### *Recruitment Strategies*

Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to “purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). Because the potential purposeful sample of all teachers and all parents at Valoma Elementary School is too large for one researcher within the time limitation of this study, and because it is unlikely that it would be possible to interview all stakeholders, this study utilized random purposeful sampling which “adds credibility to the sample when potential purposeful sample is too large” (Creswell, 2007, p. 127). After obtaining permission from the University of Texas at Arlington Institutional Review Board and the CTCISD Research Committee, I met with the Valoma principal to discuss the study. She agreed to be interviewed and scheduled a time for me to return, and also scheduled an additional time for me to interview the assistant principal. For teacher recruitment, she emailed a letter from me to her staff (see Appendix B for Participant Recruitment Letter for Valoma Elementary School Teachers) that directed them to contact me if they were interested in being interviewed. Additionally, I shared information about the study at an after-school staff meeting, and gave recruitment letters to any interested teachers. Four teachers and two language acquisition specialists contacted me, and all were scheduled and interviewed on-site at Valoma. While I was present at Valoma for interviews, three more teachers expressed interest at being interviewed. I interviewed two of the three teachers on-site at Valoma, and the third scheduled a meeting at a nearby Starbucks on

a Saturday, due to scheduling conflicts. All participants were given a \$10 gift card to Sonic Drive-In, an incentive listed in the informed consent (see Appendix D for UT Arlington Informed Consent Document), which was attached to every recruitment letter, and mentioned at the staff meeting.

In the recruitment of parents, the Valoma principal spoke about this study at a Parent Teacher Association meeting and handed out a letter from me (see Appendix C for Participant Recruitment Letter for Valoma Elementary School Parents/Legal Guardians). This recruitment strategy was aligned with a request by the CTCISD Research Committee, who asked that I not directly contact parents by phone, but instead allow parents to reach out to me if they were interested in participating. One parent contacted me, and she scheduled a meeting at a nearby Starbucks on a Saturday. I contacted the two district administrators by email requesting an interview (see Appendix A for Participant Recruitment Letter for District Administrators) and set up times after they responded to me. As with the teachers, the informed consent document containing information regarding a \$10 Sonic Drive-In gift card incentive was attached to all recruitment letters, and all interview participants were given a \$10 gift card to Sonic Drive-In.

Table 1 Participants Interviewed for Valoma Elementary School Study

Role	Name	Years Experience
District Administrators		
Superintendent	Matthew Barrington	30+
Asst. Superintendent	Calvin Robbs	30+
Campus Administrators		
Principal	Pamela Chadwick	22
Asst. Principal	Susan Richardson	20

Table 1 - *Continued*

Teachers		
Art	Amelia Brand	10
Language Acquisition	Valerie Hernandez	23
Language Acquisition	Michelle Wahler	15
Kindergarten	Marianne Kincaid	29
2nd Grade	Karen Behnisch	13
2nd Grade	Erin O'Brien	2
3rd Grade	Judy Martin	30+
3rd Grade	Virginia Simmons	24
4th Grade	Juana Perez	9
4th Grade	Jennifer Yates	2
Parent		
Parent of 4th Grader	Sara Wilkins	

Data Collection

The data collection in this study primarily consists of 14 interviews that took place between November 18, 2014 and December 19, 2014. Permission for in-district research was granted by CTCISD on September 10, 2014, and my first meeting with the Valoma principal took place on October 4, 2014. Although the possibility existed for participant-observation field notes, during the window of this research there were no campus meetings held regarding the accountability rating, nor were there any official communications sent out to teachers or parents regarding this specific topic.

“One of the most important sources of case study evidence” is the interview (Yin, 2014, p. 110). For this study, interviews consisted of no more than 10 open-ended interview questions focused specifically around the research questions of this study (Creswell, 2007). Participants were asked about their understanding of the state accountability rating system, their feelings regarding Valoma’s Met Standard rating, their impressions of if and/or how the rating affects the school and their own practice, and how they perceive that other stakeholders perceive the rating, and its importance (See Appendices E-L for Interview Protocols and Information Sheets; Stake, 1995).

In addition to interviews, a public letter from the superintendent of CTCISD was used as a document artifact in order to describe the state of the district in the introduction of the findings. This letter was written to staff, students, parents, and the CTCISD community at large, and was posted to the CTCISD website and social media pages in May of 2014. In addition to sharing information regarding the release of STAAR scores, the letter describes how CTCISD educators use a multitude of additional information to gauge student learning. This letter can be found on the CTCISD website under the news bulletins, and I located it simply by scanning the news bulletins of the past several months.

#### Data Analysis

Rich data are meaningful in that it provides the reader with a clear and accurate picture of what is going on. Maxwell (2005) qualifies one example of rich data as “verbatim transcripts of the interviews, not just notes on what you felt was significant” (p. 110). This study includes 14 interviews, each fully transcribed, in order to ensure as much clarity as possible for analysis of the data. Transcriptions were imported into NVivo 10.2.0 for Mac and coded using two different analysis strategies – first explanation-building which identifies emerging themes and assists in presenting a series of causal links and explaining how or why something happened, and then relying on theoretical propositions which follows the theoretical propositions of Weick’s (1976) seven possible functions or dysfunctions of loose coupling (Yin, 2014).

#### *Coding Process*

During the initial reviews of an interview transcript, data were scanned for patterns and regular occurrences that are given simple titles or coding categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). A coding category is housed in a ‘node’ in NVivo, or put differently, the organizing element that stores coding categories are called ‘nodes’ (QSR

International, NVivo for Mac Getting Started, 2014). The first transcript review resulted in nine coding categories, or nodes. With each new transcript review, additional nodes were added, and the preceding interview transcripts were reviewed again in order to ensure complete coverage of each coding category from the data. Often, after reviewing a transcript multiple times, node titles were changed, some nodes were combined, and some separated. “The case and the key issues need to be kept in focus. The search for meaning, the analysis, should roam out and return to those foci over and over” (Stake, 1995, p. 85). By the end of this process, 27 codes were identified under four main themes: (a) effects of accountability, (b) student success stress, (c) conflicts and coping, and (d) solutions and moving forward. From this theme series, a narrative emerged that is detailed below in the findings. However, “because such narratives cannot be precise, the better case studies are the ones in which the explanations reflect some theoretically significant propositions, whose magnitudes might start to offset the lack of precision” (Yin, 2014, p. 147). Thus, an additional coding process took place.

In addition to coding transcripts for explanation-building through emerging themes, the transcripts were coded using Weick’s (1976) seven possible functions or dysfunctions of loose coupling as coding themes. A node was created for each of the seven categories, and all 14 transcripts were reviewed for each node, seeking any portion of any interview that seemed to describe Valoma exhibiting that particular function or dysfunction. The purpose of this second analysis process is to ascertain possible causal links between (a) the level of coupling between the elementary school and the policy-making body, and (b) stakeholder perceptions regarding policy implementation. This is important because it may allow us to study the concept of accountability policy under a new light:

A loosely coupled system is a good vehicle for registering objectives outside itself, but is itself an elusive object to understand. Thus, in a

loosely coupled system, what is most likely to be socially constructed is the system itself, not the world it faces. This raises an interesting issue because it suggests that analysts know and understand least well the vehicles that are most effective at sensing. The property that makes them good sensor is the very same property that has made them indistinct objects. A corollary to these ideas is that organizational theory currently may be skewed toward the study of organizations that are least able to interpret their environments. (Orton & Weick, 1990, p. 218)

This particular research topic, educational accountability policy, has proven unwieldy in its lack of easy application from research to policy. By identifying and understanding any possible relevance in the relationship between stakeholder perspectives and the loosely coupled relationship of our Texas policy-making body to Valoma Elementary, we add to the body of research that informs on better decision-making processes at the level of both policy, and practice.

The seven coding categories created by the possible functions or dysfunctions of loose coupling are as follows:

1. Allows portions of an organization to persist; or, a lower probability that Valoma has had to, or has been able to respond to each little change in the accountability policy
2. Provides a sensitive sensing mechanism; or, a possibility of swift or faddish responses to the accountability policy
3. Provides a good system for localized adaptation; or, demonstrated ability to adjust to and modify a contingency specific to Valoma
4. Has potential to retain a great number of mutations and novel solutions; or, evidence of many varied changes within Valoma instruction or policy
5. Can prevent the spread of serious problems that manifest in one part of the system; or, evidence that Valoma is free from problems experienced at other schools, or vice versa

6. Leaves more room available for self-determination by the actors; or, evidence of a sense of efficacy or self-determination among Valoma teachers
7. Should be relatively inexpensive to operate; or, evidence of cost variance between schools in program implementation.

#### *Trustworthiness and Rigor*

Maxwell (2005) notes two particular broad threats to validity in qualitative research – researcher bias, or “the selection of data that fit the researcher’s existing theory or preconceptions” and reactivity, or the researcher’s influence on the subject or setting (p. 108). He suggests eight possible validity strategies, two of which are germane to this study – rich data and triangulation. Additionally, he notes peer review as a final step to ensure reason, and I have taken that step as well.

As noted above, interview protocols were carefully designed around the research questions, and 14 interviews were recorded and transcribed. This is an example of rich data, which is information that has enough detail and variety to provide a comprehensive understanding of any given situation (Maxwell, 2005). Triangulation of data, which “reduces the risk of chance associations and of systematic biases due to a specific method,” occurred through copious comparison of stakeholder experiences (Maxwell, 2005, p. 112).

As a follow-up strategy, to ensure that my conclusions were reasonable, two individuals reviewed the data, the analysis, and the conclusions of this study prior to its final submission. Both hold a Ph.D. and are regarded as experts in their field. One reviewer is a district administrator in CTCISD who does not work directly with Valoma, but is familiar with the state accountability system, and state accountability data for schools in CTCISD. The other reviewer is a college professor in a humanities field, living in a different state. Although neither reviewer disagreed with the overall analytic

strategies or conclusions, both made observational contributions that have strengthened the findings and discussion.

*Researcher's role*

Valoma Elementary is located within 50 miles of my home, so the school was conveniently located within driving distance for me to conduct research. I serve as a district administrator in a K-12 public school district in the North Texas area, overseeing several different programs at different grade levels. My work is primarily conducted with secondary campuses, although additional responsibilities bring me into contact with elementary campuses and staff. Prior to serving in this position, I was a coordinator of assessment and accountability in the office that oversees state-mandated testing, which is where my interest in accountability systems began to grow.

## Chapter 5

### Research Question One and Findings – Participant Perceptions

#### Regarding Influence of the Ratings

Both the state and the federal governments evaluate Texas public K-12 schools annually. In evaluating the research goals, I arrived at four overarching findings. These findings were developed from the four overarching themes that emerged in the explanation-building phase of the data analysis. The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the perceptions of the Valoma Elementary School stakeholders regarding the influence of the Texas accountability rating on the daily practices and culture of their campus?
2. What seems to influence the formation of the Valoma Elementary School stakeholders' perceptions?

Findings one and two address the first research question, and findings three and four address the second research question. I will examine each research question in its own chapter, and then close with a chapter on discussion and significance of the study for research, policy, and practice.

Before the findings are presented in detail, I will briefly review the use of loosely coupled systems as a theoretical lens, and provide an overview of the site in order to provide context for the findings. Chapters five and six are laid out in a narrative manner that provides an explanation to the research questions, as the name of the data-analysis technique would suggest. Participants' interview data were fully coded in order to explore patterns across the data, variance within the patterns, etc. Many statements were cross-referenced across multiple codes, and the information was carefully studied in order to build a narrative explanation that recognizes participants' authentic perspectives while creating a logical sequence of observation. The additional analysis for evidence of the

possible functions or dysfunctions of loose coupling is woven throughout the narrative explanations, in order to provide additional context to the participant's perspectives.

#### Loosely Coupled Systems as a Theoretical Lens

In the work of developing a deep understanding of perceptions regarding state accountability ratings, there is value in studying the organizational context between the school, and the policy-making body. This relationship is an important part of the framework on which the participants have built their perspectives. If a school has set a high-priority goal of achieving a Met Standard rating, that school would be extremely responsive to changes in the accountability system, and would likely make decisions on curriculum, instruction, and programming based solely on the accompanying assessments. As the number of variables tying two entities together grows, so does the level of coupling; thus, a school aimed primarily at achieving a Met Standard rating shares a large number of variables with the policy-making body who prescribed the rating (in this case the Texas Legislature), and the school becomes tightly coupled with that policy-making body. In order for a school and the Texas Legislature to be loosely coupled, three conditions must be met: (a) the campus principal must actively pursue an educational agenda that reflects more than just achieving a Met Standard rating as a sole campus goal, (b) the district leadership must support the campus principal's agenda, and (c) the campus must be free from intervention from the state. The Improvement Required rating obligates a campus to begin working with a Professional Service Provider hired by the state, who enacts the change necessary to achieve a Met Standard rating; thus, a campus must be maintaining a Met Standard rating from year to year in order to preserve its autonomy.

## Introduction to CTCISD and Valoma

In a state where the assessment and accountability model has long-established its place in the public eye, the CTCISD Board of Trustees hired a superintendent whose deep concerns with educational legislation are reflected in his local priorities. He explained in his interview:

The ratings that we've been using for a long time now are not the best way to determine the quality of the schools. They are focused on the wrong things, and you know, I've been spending my last decade or so as a superintendent trying to change that, and focus more on student learning and less on ratings.

Dr. Matthew Barrington has over 30 years of experience in Texas public education, and nearly 20 years of experience as a superintendent. He is not shy about pointing out where the state could do a better job, and how it affects his work as the leader of learning for over 50,000 students.

From Dr. Barrington's point of view, the rating system has focused the work of Texas schools around the state-mandated tests, to the detriment of student learning. He stated,

The more I've gotten to know, further along in my career, the more I've looked at this and thought about it, the more damaging I believe [the ratings] are. And as I continued my career, I became more and more critical of the accountability system. And, you might say, as schools improved, to me, the ceiling needed to be more important than the floor. And I think the accountability system made the floor the ceiling, and came to dominate the work of schools as the test changed. And as the emphasis on the ratings became stronger and stronger, it began more and more consuming what educators did and what students did.

Dr. Barrington's feelings are reflected in district initiatives. In a time when educational policy has more media attention than ever, CTCISD is a place where major technology initiatives and innovative strategies hold sway over district social media accounts, rather than test scores and campus ratings. Two thirds of the students in the district have been issued iPads, and trainings for project-based learning dominate the professional learning

calendar. Less than one year ago, this same superintendent joined several others across the state in issuing a public statement emphasizing the district's belief that our current state assessments and accountability system do not accurately reflect the quality of education our students receive. Below is an excerpt from that statement, issued in May of 2014, immediately after the Spring 2014 STAAR and TAKS scores were released:

Traditionally, our students meet or exceed state averages, and we predict we will do so once again. While the district has always performed well, we believe what the STAAR/TAKS measures is too narrow and does not accurately reflect the quality of education students receive in CTCISD. I applaud our teachers and students for their hard work; however, our focus is not on a four-hour, bubble-in scantron test for each core subject. ***We believe our focus should be on the learning.*** (emphasis in original)

The CTCISD Board of Trustees has supported the superintendent in taking this stance, which he also noted in the May 2014 statement:

Our Board of Trustees' support has been critical in leading the effort to push the State to reduce and redesign the high-stakes testing system. CTCISD was the first Texas school district to pass a resolution de-emphasizing the importance of high-stakes testing while maintaining high standards for every learner. Soon after this action, more than 800 Texas school boards passed this resolution. Thank you to our Board's leadership and the many boards who followed them.

Valoma Elementary School, with a Met Standard rating and with support from the superintendent and the Board of Trustees, meets these criteria. Interviews with the teachers clearly indicated that the number one goal of their principal is not to achieve a rating, but to ensure overall student progress or academic growth. In the words of language acquisition specialist Ms. Wahler:

As a campus, we review [STAAR performance] data. We do a lot with data – that is what has driven our instruction for years, ever since [the principal] has been here. . . . It's who we are. Met Standard is something that, great, we made it because of the state, but we're all about data and we want to see growth. And when we review the data, that's what we look at. We look at the [Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills], what areas are deficient, and that's what gears our instruction and we move forward with that.

Additionally, the school maintains a thriving 50/50 two-way dual language program that goes far above and beyond any state requirement. 50/50 stands for the percentage of time in language instruction – students served by this program receive 50% of their instruction in English and 50% of their instruction in Spanish, beginning in kindergarten and going up through fifth grade. This program model ensures that students' academic levels are maintained equally in both English and in Spanish. Two-way stands for the native language make-up of students in the classroom – in addition to the English Language Learners receiving state-required bilingual services through the Dual Language program, CTCISD allows students from English-speaking homes to opt-in to the program, which means that classrooms are made up of both English learners and Spanish learners, each learning two full academic languages. This programmatic structure provides a social platform for students to develop second-language proficiency, and also allows them greater potential for developing proficiency in their native language.

#### Research Question One and Findings – Participants' Perceptions

##### Regarding Influence of the Rating

Valoma Elementary School has the elements it needs to be able to operate with autonomy, for educators to make their own decisions on how to drive instruction, and to implement programs that they feel enrich their students' education as well as providing the minimum foundation. And indeed, the teachers at Valoma Elementary School describe their actions, decisions, and instructional plans with a language of efficacy and self-determination that seem to clearly demonstrate a loosely coupled relationship between the school, and the state policy-making body. However, language of stress and doubt, which emerges when teachers describe their feelings, brings to light underlying evidence of the opposite. Below are the explanation-building narratives for the two overarching themes that developed into findings under the first research question.

Teachers do perceive that the school rating affects their campus culture and daily practices. Finding one addresses how the rating affects campus culture, and finding two addresses how the rating affects daily practices.

*Finding one: Community Perception Weighs on Teacher Morale*

One commonly held opinion among all participants is that the prevailing socioeconomic level of the student body is a stronger factor in determining a campus rating than anything else. The use of these ratings by local realtors to identify neighborhoods with great schools causes the Valoma teachers a great deal of concern, as they experienced the anguish of a lowered rating several years ago and have not yet recovered from the emotional upheaval of moving from Recognized to Acceptable (this was under the four-level rating system that was in place from 1994-2012, prior to the change to the current two-level system of Met Standard and Improvement Required). Many of the participants perceive that the community was angered and embarrassed by the 'low performance' of the school, and recall the negative effect of the school's performance reaching the housing market. They describe a community perception of their school and their job performance as negative and as misunderstood. Their language includes terms of helplessness as they describe a rating system that is so confusing that they are unable to explain to their neighbors and friends why the system is unfair. The level of coupling between the school and the policy-making body is tight as they discuss the effect rating has on teacher morale. This low morale affects the Valoma campus culture. Below, I provide a narrative of the explanation-building analysis for this finding.

## Socioeconomic level as key factor in determining the rating

The ratings are perceived as largely determined by a school's student population, rather than measuring the quality of education, or the amount of student learning. This belief starts at the top of the district, with the superintendent, Dr. Barrington. He said:

I don't know why you'd want a rating system that does not accurately reflect the quality of education that's going on in the schools. It's really deceptive. And it's not just the current system that we have right now, that the commissioner rolled out a couple of years ago. It's been that way for a good while. It produces a stigma to some schools; it exaggerates the quality of others. A lot of the rating is based on the socioeconomic level of the people that attend there.

Dr. Barrington's key point is that the campus rating is primarily determined by the state-mandated test scores of students and that economically disadvantaged students traditionally score lower than their peers. For educators who spent a lot of time looking at campus ratings, test scores, and socioeconomic levels, it can be easy to begin to see a connection between campus socioeconomic levels and campus ratings. However, the public is not as familiar with educational ratings and test-score trends as seasoned educators are, and the campus ratings appear to designate the quality of the overall campus as a learning facility. Thus, a school made up of privileged students whose parents have high literacy levels may achieve a high campus rating even if the quality of the teachers is low, whereas a school with a high population of economically disadvantaged students may still receive a low rating even if their teacher quality is high.

Ms. Kinkaid, a kindergarten teacher with children of her own enrolled in CTCISD schools, made roughly the same observation in regards to what the ratings actually measure. She said,

As a parent, I do look at ratings when I'm looking at schools. I would look at ratings. Most definitely. Even as they are now. I think it tells a little bit about the students that are in the schools. It doesn't say much about the type of teaching. . . . From my perspective, it tells a little bit more about the home education, and the home life, and how the

students come to school. What type of vocabulary is used at home, what type of interaction is at home, that's what it tells me.

Ms. Kinkaid, a veteran teacher, was calmly accepting what she recognized as truth. However, other teachers seemed to carry a heavier level of frustration regarding this topic. Fourth grade teacher Ms. Martin reflected on the calculation of Index 1, which requires that student population groups must meet minimum performance floors by subject area. "You have this one kiddo, you've got however many kids that make up a [student population group], and one kid may put that over. Well the public doesn't see that, but they see, 'Oh, you were rated lower.'"

Ms. Martin's perspective was closer to what most of the teachers thought about the accountability ratings – they feel it can be frustrating that the rating evaluates a multitude of indicators, including the performance of different student population groups, but that if you miss the target goal of just one area, the entire campus (and thus, the performance of every educator in the building) is labeled as Improvement Required.

#### Realtor ratings

The assignment of these ratings has given rise to the concept of realtor ratings, a descriptive term that connotes the idea of ratings being valuable only to realtors, and having little value anywhere else. The superintendent described the origin of the phrase.

He said:

You know, you drive around neighborhoods and you see developers putting a sign out, for this "if you buy a home here, you get to go to this school, or this school district." We have a community, a rather affluent community that just went in, and we re-zoned that area . . . and this new development is right next to an elementary school, but we re-zoned away from that elementary school to another school further south. And I was rather irritated because the developer put up a sign that said "you get to go to this school, not that school across the street, but the one further south!" All based on ratings that I think were inaccurate in terms of comparing those two schools. We now call them realtor ratings quite a bit, because that seems to be the most useful purpose of them.

Three teachers mentioned this same situation, and four other teachers mentioned the relationship between campus ratings and home choice or home prices. Dr. Barrington's irritation at the developer who put up the sign speaks directly to what he views as problematic about the ratings, in that they unfairly influence the community's perception of school quality.

The sting of having a sign erected to let possible home-buyers know that their child gets to go to a different school was deeply felt. The school's principal, Ms. Chadwick, addressed realtor ratings from the point of view of having direct conversations with local realtors, noting a time five years ago when, under a previous rating system, the school dropped from Recognized to Acceptable. "I've been told more than once by realtors that I personally was affecting their income and the property values in the community." Ms. Chadwick's tone, unlike the superintendent, was very matter-of-fact. The likely difference between Dr. Barrington's irritation and Ms. Chadwick's acceptance is that in this particular situation, Dr. Barrington senses that he has some modicum of control or influence over the situation as a leader in the larger community, where the principal feels she has none outside her own Valoma staff, students, and parents.

Indeed, during my interview with a Valoma parent, Ms. Wilkins, the topic of taking the rating into consideration when purchasing a home came up when I asked how they came to be in this area. She mentioned that they moved from a neighborhood just a mile away. When I asked her whether or not she moved purposefully to change schools, she answered "a little bit, and a little bit because that's where the house was. We took into account school ratings and all those fun things before we bought our house."

The concept was neatly summed up by second grade teacher Ms. Miller who said "They buy their houses based on the school ratings. . . . I think the ratings were maybe a realtor's dream, made it easy to sell houses, but I think it's gotten to the point

where it's not doing what it's supposed to." The pressure of having people's home prices resting on the shoulders of the teachers as they try to prepare students for the test is a major part of the way that the campus culture is affected by the rating.

#### Community perception

The idea that homes are purchased based on ratings is, to teachers, less problematic than the motivations that may underlie those decisions. The concept of negative community perceptions is a theme that runs deep, and in some cases, seems tied to the drop in the school's accountability rating five years ago, under the previous system. The campus had been rated Recognized for many years, but dropped to Acceptable in the final years that the four-rating system was in operation. The principal, Ms. Chadwick, describes the situation leading to the rating change. She said:

Our campus demographics have changed so significantly. In the 11 years we've been open, the economically disadvantaged percentage has gone from 18% low SES to now 60%, so the way teachers need to teach on this campus is very different now than it was 11 years ago. And through the years, through those changes, scores dipped. Under the old ratings, we were Recognized for – ever, and then dipped down to Acceptable . . . and that threw the community in a tailspin. Lots of conversations, private meetings with parents that wanted private conferences with me to discuss what was wrong, why it was wrong, and how I was going to personally fix it. At that time, with [the] dual language [program] having just started, we literally had, I met with over 60 parents who were basically interviewing me to see if the benefits of dual language for their child outweighed the negatives of going to a 'low-performing' school. And we were Acceptable.

Ms. Chadwick's commentary here is key for two reasons. First, she identifies that maintaining the higher rating of Recognized was simpler when only 11% of the students were economically disadvantaged. As the leader of learning for the Valoma staff and students, principal Chadwick is not someone who makes excuses or spends time complaining, a character trait that I will describe further in detail in the next chapter. Thus, her recognition of this fact is key to identifying how deeply embedded the relationship between socioeconomic levels and school ratings is. Second, she identifies

that under the previous four-rating system, even though the rating of Acceptable is still not considered low-performing by the state (low-performing schools were rated Unacceptable), it was still perceived by the parents and the community as low-performing.

The drop in rating was a blow to the campus. Teachers who were present at the time mentioned it, and remember the reactions of the parents. Language acquisition specialist Ms. Wahler recalled the tone of the questions: “Oh gosh – Acceptable? That’s not good enough for my kid.’ Again, [the rating is] not a true picture of what you have on campus with teachers, with instruction.” Ms. Chadwick described what it was like from her viewpoint as the principal. She explained:

Massively negative. Hundreds upon hundreds of hours of PR. And keeping the campus culture of the staff up - nobody wants to work at a low performing school, nobody wants to work at the school that parents are trying to get their kids out of, especially when they are working their tails off, and know how hard they work, and what kind of quality is going on within these walls.

Thus, the campus culture of Valoma was directly affected by the rating, in that the staff recognized how their work affected others outside of the school, and they perceive the higher rating as harder to achieve with a high population of students who are economically disadvantaged.

Key emotions: Helplessness, and feeling misunderstood

The Valoma teachers feel as though they are working in a system that makes a ‘win’ or a ‘passing score’ harder to achieve than it is for teachers in wealthier, less-diverse schools. Yet when they miss the mark, they feel they are not judged on their own merits, but on a standard that others do not understand. It is this very concept that I believe is at the core of the low morale that teachers described. The assistant superintendent, Dr. Calvin Robbs, spoke to this specific idea. He said:

I think people pay attention to their neighborhood school. You know, what they call realtor ratings. I mean, to me it's a sad deal that we have to find an easy way to tag campuses, because it's used against campuses that have a specific set of factors. Those are factors that, the Valomas of the world, they can't control that. So, the parents don't understand.

Dr. Robbs used a key phrase here – “they can't control that.” It is this lack of control that seems to cause the low morale, the fact that teachers are unable to do anything about the situation they are in. Specifically, they cannot see a way to change how their campus rating will ever stop serving as a descriptor of their teaching abilities to the community at large. Third-grade teacher Judy Martin sums up the combination of feelings. She explained:

We work so hard, and sometimes we don't see very good results. And what else can we do? What else can we do that we are not doing that will help this? And I think people in public think – oh, they're not teaching over there. But we are! But they don't understand these kids don't have the same things that their kids have. They're coming to school hungry. They're coming to school in the same clothes they've worn all week. It makes a difference, and I don't think the public realizes that.

Ms. Martin identifies not only her frustration with the situation, but her lack of control, asking “what else can we do that we are not doing that will help this?” Again, the issue of control is what seems to trigger the feeling of helplessness, which is what seems to affect teacher morale most powerfully.

Rating calculation complexity exacerbates the problem

The new four-index, seven distinction designation, 117 system safeguard rating system is not making it easier for teachers to make their case of great teaching. The complicated statistical calculations that go into figuring each index make it difficult to understand, let alone explain to someone else. Third grade teacher Virginia Simmons struggles: “I look at those sheets that come out. I don't know how to read them. They're very complex. It's very confusing.” And fourth grade teacher Jennifer Yates noted that if these are difficult

for her to understand, it must be even more difficult to parents who aren't immersed in educational jargon all day long. She stated:

I'm in this every day with these kids and with the TEKS and with the curriculum, and I have a hard time wrapping my mind around it. And you know, I've done STAAR before, I understand STAAR. I've disaggregated data, I've done all that stuff. And it's hard for me to understand? Then a parent who has to dig-dig-dig-dig to find it, then dig-dig-dig through the glossary – it's a lot of work for them.

Ms. Simmons and Ms. Yates, along with every other participant, identified what I believe to be one of the causes of the feeling of helplessness. The complexity of the rating system decreases the likelihood that non-school employees will take the time to consider how the rating might represent something other than the overall quality of the school.

The superintendent identifies the increasing accountability complexity over the years, and the probable good-will intention behind the shift. This motivation is key to this study, because it illustrates the value in understanding all different facets of a policy before it is changed. He said:

You know, I've been talking about people misusing and misreading the ratings, and they've become increasingly complex. The latest iteration of that – I'm trying to give them a little credit on this, I think with the criticism of once-a-year high-stakes standardized testing, that there was a sincere intent to include other indicators so a rating would not just be based on that test – I think that the commissioner meant well in that respect, but the result of it was a rating that was far more Byzantine than what we had before. And nobody understands how it works, and it's still punitive to schools because of the clientele that they educate, it still doesn't accurately reflect the quality of education that goes on there.

The purpose of the rating system is to ensure that students, or student groups, are not slipping through the cracks of a school unnoticed, failing to achieve, while their peers matriculate with no problems. Issues with data validity that arose in the early days of the Texas accountability system have been resolved with statistical measures that ensure that no student group can be hidden from sight, and that campuses that are making progress with underachieving students get some form of relief. However, the addition of

amendments and statistical measures put in place over the years to account for these problems has resulted in an accountability system that seems esoteric to most according to the participants. Thus, the allure of the rating is hard to surpass. It may be difficult to understand the process by which this campus arrived at the rating of Met Standard, but it is not hard to draw meaning from the words Met Standard and Improvement Required.

Level of coupling: tight

The interview data that was used for this first finding exhibited almost no functions or dysfunctions of loose coupling. When teachers were discussing the calculation of the campus rating or the community perception of the rating, they identified as tightly coupled to the policy-making body. Unable to operate independently of a system that they perceive as unfair, their spoken language includes words and phrases that communicate helplessness, rather than self-determination. Phrases like “I don’t know how” and “What else can we do?” Even the assistant superintendent’s statements identify a lack of control: “the Valomas of the world, they can’t control that.”

#### *Finding Two: Student Failure Adds to Teacher Stress*

During the interviews, more than half of the participants drew my attention to the difficulty level of the tests, which they perceive to be developmentally inappropriate. In addition, almost all of the participants stated that the test is inconsistent with everyday best practices in the classroom. These perceived barriers to strong student performance on an assessment serve to raise the stress levels of the teachers and administrators at the campus. Teachers and administrators contemplate how to cope with test content that may be beyond their students’ reach, or how to prepare students for a test that might hinder their ability to demonstrate what they learned. Every participant voiced a strong desire to maintain only the best instructional practices in the classroom, and the effort to deliver high test scores while maintaining best practices has affected the everyday

practices of the school. Predominately, this effect is reflected in the heavy workload that the teachers described, resulting from a focus on achieving two contrasting goals. The level of coupling between the school and the policy-making body is still tight as teachers describe their stress in this finding, but not as tight as it was when describing their low morale. Part of the helplessness identified above (under finding one) is no longer a barrier, because teachers perceive that they have the ability to overcome these obstacles, to a certain extent.

#### Student failure

A common thread of frustration is the concept of student failure on a test, which causes the student to identify as a struggling learner. Participants identified the value of having data from an assessment in order to assist in planning instruction for that student, but there was disagreement with attaching the word fail to a younger child, especially the third graders. The assistant principal, Susan Richardson, described how this works against her educational philosophy. She said:

I like looking at kids on more of a developmental scale. And if there would be a way to make it more like a portfolio that grows with a child – because if they started out way down here (gesturing low), I mean, they work so hard, and can seriously make more than a year's growth! And yet they're still going to fail their STAAR test. They're still going to fail, and you know, I hated that word, and I know it's Met or Not Met, but parents still see it as pass/fail. I'd rather have some kind of piece of data that can show what new skills they've added to their portfolio this year that they didn't have last year.

The teachers were in agreement with Ms. Richardson across the board on the concept of the pass/fail standard being too rigorous for third grade. Participants offered different ideas about the developmental level at which a pass/fail state-mandated exam is appropriate; some were content to leave it at the fifth grade level, some wanted to remove it entirely.

## Developmentally inappropriate

Several went a step further and pointed out that the new academic standards are set too high, particularly in Math. Ms. Simmons' main concern on the day that I spoke with her was how the second-grade students were handling three-digit numbers, since this is a concept they would be tested on when they reached her in third grade. She expressed:

They changed the math TEKS this year. We've been struggling to get these second grade students to see three-digit numbers, and it's not developmentally appropriate. I come from early childhood, and it's not developmentally appropriate. They can't wrap their minds around it.

Indeed, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for math were changed this year, including the grade level at which several concepts were introduced. Six teachers mentioned developmentally inappropriate standards overall, three of those five mentioned the math standards in particular. This is one of two areas under finding two where teachers spoke with a high level of frustration, even anger. Kindergarten teacher Ms. Kinkaid identified the key to the anger: "I don't think our students are ready for it. I'm all about academic vocabulary and all that, but cognitively, developmentally, rationally, many of our students are not ready. Yet. Many are, but some aren't." The important emphasis here is that the students need to have the opportunity to take information in at their own speeds, which may vary some. Ms. Richardson, the assistant principal, summed this topic up best. She was adamant that the skills can and will come if students are given the time. Ms. Richardson explained:

For third graders and fourth graders, they're just still so young. Looking at kids from a child psychology standpoint, developmentally they were not ready for some things that they get later. And they'll get it later. Like your struggling readers . . . so many kids don't start learning how to read, truly learning, until third and fourth grade, and we're giving them this test that they have to meet, and I'm thinking, "give them a chance to figure this out! They're going to get there, they're just not there yet."

The anger of this sentiment, for the six teachers and the assistant principal, seems tied to fact that a child's success in learning is being determined by an outside entity, and that the outside entity has failed to recognize a clear truth about student learning (which is that students learn at different speeds). This lack of control undermines these participants in two different ways; it removes them as the expert, in that they are unable to be the sole determinant of a child's progress, and it prevents them from protecting the child against a label of failure that they see as untrue in some cases.

#### Test design inconsistent with best practices

Participants also expressed concerns about the gap in practice between the state-mandated assessments, and commonly held best practices regarding student learning and assessment. Participants identified a number of different factors, based on their own priorities and standards. I will identify the two most frequently discussed items here.

The complaint with the most consistency across the group is the requirement for a third grader to spend a number of hours in a silent room taking a long exam. Language acquisition specialist, Ms. Wahler, pointed out a major difference between everyday student norms and test-taking days. She said:

We're not teaching testing strategies. They're not used to sitting down anymore, and reading a passage and working with worksheets. I know I have, because that was what was expected when I was in school – but my kids don't do worksheets. So you sit down as a student and take a test with a worksheet and a passage and all these – forget it! So STAAR, to me, because of what the district wanted changed in our instruction, hey, they're sitting down for hours doing this? Not talking, not collaborating? No technology, nothing? Of course what's coming out is... Hey, it shouldn't be a surprise.

Seven teachers identified sitting still for a long period of time as a problem, but Ms. Wahler makes the key comparison to our current instructional practices. CTCISD is actively pursuing the implementation of engagement strategies that ensure students are

moving, interacting, using technology, and experiencing hands-on learning. While formative and summative assessments are interwoven throughout the district's expectations, there is nothing else at Valoma Elementary that looks like the extended-silence, thick booklet, multiple-choice format of the STAAR exams.

Fourth grade teacher Ms. Perez further identified why this barrier can be so problematic for students. She said,

They have to have the stamina to sit there for four hours, and read through text that is on a level that they may or may not understand, either because of a language barrier or because of whatever reading level they're actually on. At their comprehension level, it's very, very frustrating. . . . It is pencil-pencil-pencil, drill-drill-drill, practice-practice-practice, problem-solve problem-solve problem-solve. I mean, dig for the information – it's frustrating.

Students have four hours to complete the test, and with the stakes so high, rushing is not encouraged. Thus, four hours allotted to testing on the STAAR test day is not an uncommon site at Valoma, as a large number of their students are English Language Learners who do require extra time to process the information.

Three teachers also mentioned the problem of STAAR tests not taking place at the end of the school year. Second grade teacher Brianne Charmaund discussed the way this timetable affects the necessary speed of instruction. She expressed:

The third grade STAAR test is supposed to measure what they've learned in third grade. But it's in the middle of the second semester. So it's hard to really gauge what have they really learned, because we aren't really given the full school year. Same thing with fourth and fifth grade. You don't really get the full school year to teach it before your kids are tested on it. So it's hard – you can't spend as much time on certain things that maybe you would want to, because you just have to move on and hope that gap isn't very big and hopefully when you review before the test, then you can help fill those gaps.

Indeed, most subject-area tests for elementary and middle school students are given during April, while the fourth and seventh grade writing test are given during March.

Testing timelines are set to give the teachers as much time as possible to teach the content, while also allowing enough time for the assessments to be graded and scores to be reported before the school year is out, so that teachers can remediate student learning where gaps exist. In grades five and eight, students must pass the test in order to be promoted to the next grade, so another testing opportunity is available before the school year is out, and a third is available during the summer.

Level of coupling: (not as) tight

The interview data coded for this second finding did have some brief statements from the participants that revealed the level of coupling beginning to loosen. Teachers displayed strong emotions when discussing the frustration they feel for their students; however, their words take on a slightly different tone when discussing potential consequences that a student might face. Fourth grade teacher Ms. Perez shared:

And these kids, by the time they get to third grade, they've already quit. If they haven't been successful, they've already quit. And it's really hard to pull them up then, really really hard.

The slight difference in expression here, the glimmer of possibility for student success, is the key to the slightly loosened coupling that occurs in finding two.

Throughout the data that was used for this particular finding, there were intermittent statements by participants that registered some small level of loose coupling within four of the seven possible functions or dysfunctions of loose coupling, as described by Weick (1976). Two of the categories were identified only once, and a third was identified only twice; thus, they did not amass enough information to confirm the presence of loose coupling. However, there were seven occasions when participants expressed a sense of self-determination, or described their own work with efficacy. These moments, which match Weick's description of the sixth possible function of loose coupling, occur when teachers are discussing the effect of the accountability system on

their students. Though their words depict a stressful situation, their language shifted to include words that indicate they feel they have some influence over the end result. Third grade teacher Ms. Simmons provides an example of this when describing how unfair the accountability system is for students who have moved back and forth between different countries, learning content in different languages and in different educational systems.

She said:

I have one instance comes to mind. This little girl is in the third grade – she doesn't know her numbers, doesn't know her letters, doesn't know how to write a word – and we're going, "Oh!" You know, it's in second grade where we need to catch these kiddos. But when they move away and come back, you know, the wheels of progress turn slowly to get them where they need to be. It's just a laborious task. And I have to work hard, and I have to make sure that – "okay, you need to be watching this one."

Ms. Simmons' description of a third grade student facing the STAAR test depicts a situation that is problematic because of the ratings. She notes that you need to catch students with content gaps in the second grade, and the unspoken reasoning is that because STAAR testing begins in third grade. However, Ms. Simmons' description of this student's performance does not include a possibility for the child to fail. She identifies the task as laborious, she identifies stress at the need to pull the student up so quickly, but she does not express the same helplessness identified by so many teachers when discussing the realtor ratings, or the community's perception of the school. There is a self-determination present that was not discernable when discussing those external concerns.

Teacher stress levels are definitely raised because of a test (which is tied to the campus rating) that is perceived as being developmentally inappropriate and inconsistent with best instruction practices. However, teachers have some control over how they can prepare their students to face the challenge of the exam. Thus, the level of coupling between the school and the policy-making body, while still seemingly tight for finding two,

displays indications of loosening when the teachers allude to their personal influence over student success.

#### Research Question One Conclusion

Participants perceive that the school rating affects the campus culture and daily activities of Valoma Elementary. In particular, they identify that the community perception weighs on teacher morale, and that student failure adds to teacher stress levels. When discussing teacher morale the level of coupling between the school and the policy-making body is tight; the participants use a language of helplessness when discussing the socioeconomic level as a key factor in determining ratings, the emergence of the concept of realtor ratings, the negative perception of the community, and the complexity of the rating system. When discussing teacher stress levels, the level of coupling is still tight, but not to the degree it was when discussing teacher morale. Here, the participants use a language of frustration, but not of helplessness as they discuss student failure, a developmentally inappropriate test, and assessment design that is inconsistent with best teaching practices. These are the major findings regarding the first research question; chapter six will discuss the major findings that address the second research question.

## Chapter 6

### Research Question Two and Findings – What Seems to Influence the Formation of Perceptions

There were four major findings for this study, constructed from the four overarching themes that emerged in the data analysis process. Findings three and four directly correspond to the second research question, which is as follows:

2. What seems to influence the formation of the Valoma Elementary School stakeholders' perceptions?

The participants in this study perceive that the campus accountability rating influences the daily practices and culture of their campus. Research question two seeks to understand what factors may have contributed to participant perspectives, and findings three and four address this question.

This chapter begins by presenting a series of conflicting views that the Valoma teachers expressed during their interviews; for example, every teacher voiced the value of accountability, but some went so far as to say that they see the value in a rating system, or in ranking schools, but that none of our Texas systems have been the right system. The teachers wish to be recognized as leaders in their field – they are interested in accolades for their hard work, but those emotions do not align with what they feel when they consider the overall effect of the rating system on their students. When I identified these cognitive conflicts of interest, and considered the level of coupling of the school with the policy-making body, patterns of motivation emerged. The chapter concludes with a series of participant perspectives regarding what policy changes might affect student learning in a positive way. These perspectives reveal aspects of the accountability rating policy that participants feel most strongly about in terms of teacher

morale, and teacher stress levels. Below, I will provide an in-depth narrative explaining each finding.

### Finding Three: Campus Ratings Cause Conflicting Emotions

All of the Valoma teachers expressed a desire to have accountability for education, in some form or fashion, whether it be campus-based, district-based, or state-based. Surprisingly, many of the teachers' interviews contained statements that seemed contradictory, when they were discussing different topics. When they mentioned realtor ratings they expressed frustration and stress at having to hold students to an unfair standard, or else face the indignation of the community when the rating fell. But when they talked about the accountability system in theory, some teachers contradicting views went as far as expressing pleasure for the rating system because of the current Met Standard rating.

Additionally, the principal was mentioned throughout the teacher interviews as a driving force behind strong instructional practices, sometimes with a positive tone and sometimes with exasperation. Several teachers who had been at the campus for over a decade with the principal mentioned that her strong grip on classroom instructional practices has always been at the core of her leadership philosophy, and the principal herself told me that she uses the data from the STAAR tests to help guide teacher planning. In this specific situation, the actions of the principal are purposeful in that she has high expectations for the Valoma staff, and she is willing to allow the rating to serve as a powerful motivator.

When speaking about the principal, and about their actual day-to-day work, the teachers often spoke with a language of autonomy and self-determination. Although they expressed consternation at the way the campus rating affected their school culture and daily practices, and although they described the principal as a driving force in what their

instruction looks like, they still reflect positive attitudes when they describe their own work. It is for this reason that I believe the principal is controlling the level of coupling between the school and the policy-making body, as much as she can. She has the ability to allow her teachers freedom of decision-making and instructional practice, and she does so by shielding them from the outside influences that might cause them to resume a tightly coupled state with the policy-making body. Thus, the principal herself serves as a factor in determining how teachers perceive the rating to influence the school. The difficulty of analysis in this finding is determining exactly how her actions affect the perceptions of the Valoma teachers. Different participants expressed different feelings; for some teachers, the actions of the principal could be viewed as a part of the cause of stress and low morale, while for others, the her actions serve as a shield, protecting them from additional stress and low morale caused by the rating.

Below, I will describe each aspect of this finding in detail. In narrative form, I will review the participants' desire to maintain accountability in some form, the way that the principal drives the purpose and sets the standard for teachers at Valoma, the way that teachers describe their day-to-day actions with a language of autonomy and self-determination, and the way that the level of coupling is used by the principal to maintain high expectations.

#### *Value of Accountability*

Out of the nine teachers interviewed, seven discussed the value of accountability as an overarching philosophy and expressed their desire to have: (a) goals and/or standards to work towards and (b) assessment tools that allow them to gauge their students' performance levels in comparison to other students. Four of those teachers recognized, or at least verbalized, the conflict of needing relief from the rating, and yet needing a system that does what our accountability system does. Second grade teacher Brianne

Charmaund identified both the need for identifying struggling teachers, and the desire for the rating to remain private. She said:

I like that we get an individualized school – well, not really rating, but just statistics on how our kids did and what areas they struggle with. So I like looking at that, and I feel like that can guide your instruction, and improve things for your system. So I like that schools get data, but I don't know how open to the public I feel like that needs to be. I think it's good for teachers to know, for feedback about individual students, and whether they get it or not. And also, as a teacher, what areas maybe, if you really don't like algebra, and you don't teach it very, with excitement, maybe your kids don't do very well, and so maybe that would sway you to do a little bit more with algebra? So it's good as a teacher to see those ratings specifically for your school.

While Brianne has identified that it is good to see ratings specifically for your school as a teacher, she is also not keen on ratings per se, and really just prefers the statistics. Her point is understandable – the data from the exams is great, but once it is made public, it is no longer about improving student learning. But the conundrum is clear – could it ever be possible to keep a rating secret?

Third grade teacher Virginia Simmons knows she doesn't like the rating, but she also sees it as important. She said:

I think that [the rating] is important for our kids because they're going to have to go on and if they're not doing... if we're not teaching them what we need to be teaching them, I mean, we're teaching them to go out and, you know, have a good life. And there are some things that I don't like, but it's important that we keep up with what the outside world thinks. We can't be closed. It's important to me.

The key to Ms. Simmons' statement is that she deeply values her role as an educator; she sees it as extremely important that she help her students have a good life. In addition, she brings other educators into the accountability fold with her when she says, "it's important that we keep up with what the outside world thinks. We can't be closed." Ms. Simmons recognizes that it is important that teachers be held to standard, and yet she doesn't like the rating that she deems as important. This interesting conundrum presents itself with others as well, but for slightly different reasons. Art teacher Amelia

Brand found herself unable to settle on what she really thinks about the rating as a whole.

She shared:

Since we're Met Standard I don't necessarily have a problem with that term, but I don't know. I really do believe that we're doing a lot of good here. But at the same time, you do have to have some measure of student performance, no matter what we're doing and how we're doing it. So I don't necessarily have a problem with it.

Ms. Brand identifies her discomfort a little bit differently than Ms. Simmons, in that she seems to feel that the rating lets her down by not highlighting all of the good things the school is doing. She notes that she doesn't "necessarily have a problem with that term" in referring to the campus rating, and she agrees that we "do have to have some measure of student performance." But she is emphatic in her belief that "we are doing a lot of good here" and closes by stating that she doesn't "necessarily have a problem with it."

The assistant superintendent, Dr. Calvin Robbs, describes the conundrum of needing an accountability system – but having conflicting feelings about it – as a deep-seated philosophical question. He identifies a human need to rate and rank, beyond the simple desire to understand, as part of the core issue.

People are upset about the amount of testing, but they're still not sure that there shouldn't be some testing. . . . You've got to provide something in place of the current system that is simple. And yet, people like to rate. You know, human beings like to rate and rank things. I mean, that's why everything you see is ranked. Seven out of ten, or a two-star movie, or a four-star movie – I mean, I think it's sort of ingrained into us; we've got to rank things. And it's hard to explain to people that you shouldn't be ranking kids - which is what you're doing.

Dr. Robbs succinctly identified what I think may be one of the hardest hurdles to overcome in the work of redesigning accountability systems. The desire to put a ranking or a rating policy in place may be hard to overcome, but the difficulty of removing one may prove even harder.

*Principal Drives Purpose, and Sets the Standard*

The accountability at Valoma Elementary is upheld by the principal, Pamela Chadwick. Several of the teachers who have been at Valoma with her for over a decade point to her as the critical defender of the instructional standard, not the rating. Language Acquisition Specialist Valerie Hernandez told me that data-driven instruction was not a new strategy as a result of the rating drop several years ago, and that she can't imagine that a future rating drop would stop them from offering the enrichment programs they have today. She explained:

I think, as a campus, we review data. We do a lot with data; that is what has driven our instruction for years, ever since Ms. Cheatham has been here. It's the data. So in return, Met Standard or not, we would still do the same. I mean, we would still be doing enrichment. It's who we are.

Valerie supports all of the teachers at Valoma as a language acquisition specialist, but the dual language teachers utilize her most frequently, as that is her area of expertise. Neither of the language acquisition specialists at Valoma seemed to feel any fear or apprehension about what might happen to dual language, which is an enrichment program, if the rating were to drop to Improvement Required.

Third grade teacher Virginia Simmons also identified Ms. Chadwick as the primary catalyst for strong teaching practices. She said:

I really think that our administrator, she wants us to – well she's very data-oriented, and she looks at the data. I think that we should be [rated] Superior, because we've worked so hard. And the growth that these babies make! That's one of the things that we're always striving for – is this child making progress? What can we do to move him forward or her forward? And if they're not making progress, what do we need to do? How can we help them? It's because we all work so hard. And it's because our administrator – these are the goals she expects of us. And it kind of trickles down - we expect this from our children.

I asked Ms. Simmons directly if she felt that her principal's drive for performance came from the rating or if Ms. Chadwick would be this driven with or without the rating; Ms. Simmons did not hesitate. "It's in her. It's all her." Even the parent I interviewed, Sara

Wilkins, clearly identified the principal as the instructional leader of the campus: “I know Mrs. Chadwick has a really – well, she expects a lot from her teachers. So we do get wonky [teacher] turnover sometimes, because she has very high expectations, but I appreciate that.” These participants all identified Ms. Chadwick as the key driver of accountability at Valoma, and seemed to feel that her actions are appropriate for the role of a principal, as the instructional leader of a school.

In addition to these participant observations, Ms. Chadwick herself pointed out to me in our interview that she does not hesitate to use the accountability rating as a catalyst for strong instruction. Even in referring to the drop in ratings several years ago, which Ms. Chadwick expressed a great deal of strife over, she found silver lining in that it gave her credibility for insisting on updated teaching strategies. She stated:

That made teachers nervous. It kind of helped with the fact that strategies – teaching strategies – needed to be changed or updated. And people either left or updated, and we’ve seen the rise in student success again in [the student progress] measure, along with other measures.

Her thoughts on index three of the accountability rating system, which she refers to above as the student progress measure, are more than clear to me by the time I have finished the interviews for this dissertation. Ms. Chadwick identifies the student progress measure as the clearest way to use the STAAR scores to benefit her teachers’ instructional practices and her students’ academic achievement. She recognizes the validity of this measure, and ensures that each one of her teachers understands how it works. Ms. Chadwick shared how she uses it as a principal. She said:

I think the progress measure added a lot. That’s one area that I complained about and talked about every year. For those kiddos who make two and a half years of [academic] growth but still didn’t pass – why didn’t we get credit for that? So I love the fact that the progress measure is there. There are so many things measured now within the four areas. I mean, it’s looking at the English Language Learners, it’s taking into consideration their language... This probably isn’t popular, but for teacher effectiveness, it’s good to look at a teacher’s scores each

year. And how much growth they gave. The growth – the progress measure, as related to teaching staff. How effective is the teaching staff? For example - if you have a teacher who, everyone passed, but very few kids made a year's worth of growth, versus a teacher who, maybe not everybody passed, but every kid made at least two years of growth. So, teacher effectiveness.

The Valoma teachers echoed the sentiments of Ms. Chadwick in their interviews. Over and over again the progress measure came up, and teachers described this index with an understanding that surprised me. The complexity of this particular index warrants lots of re-reading every time I approach it with the need to understand its calculation in-depth, and I am well-versed in accountability systems and calculations. Fourth grade teacher Jennifer Yates best expressed the reason for this display of knowledge across the board when she described Ms. Chadwick's expectations for student learning. This is her second year as a teacher, and she explained to me how it had been clarified for her. She said:

I will honestly say that up until this year, I thought that it was, like, a pass/fail type thing. I told Ms. Chadwick, "well, if my kid made a 90% last year and a 90% this year, I'm happy." And she said "I'm not, because they didn't show growth." This test is 4th grade, and last year was 3rd grade – they're already taking a year harder test, so how is a 90% in 4th grade not better than a 90% in 3rd grade? So that's a really difficult thing for me to even wrap my mind around.

Ms. Yates hadn't yet entirely grasped the concept but she was certainly focused on it and interested in helping her students achieve academic success. And Ms. Chadwick did not dismiss the hard work of the Valoma teachers who endeavor to meet her standards. She realizes she is seeking a level of instruction that is above and beyond what might be required in other schools. Ms. Chadwick explained:

I will tell people, "I will put the instruction in this building up against anyone. Anyone in the district." I've seen it too many times, where people come from other schools and they can't make it here. It's hard to teach and differentiate to a bunch of different levels. And we don't have free Fridays; we have day one, 7:50 am, to Day 185, 2:50 pm. We don't stop for playtime. We don't waste time. We can't. They can't afford it.

I might guess that Ms. Chadwick does not hesitate to use anything at her disposal, to ensure that the students at Valoma Elementary are receiving the best possible instruction. Although the rating might be causing some additional effects to the campus culture and everyday practices of Valoma Elementary, I do not consider it to be the primary driver.

*Coping, and Using the Policy in Everyday Practice*

Interestingly, when the teachers begin to talk about how they actually cope with the stress of the rating, or with the expectations of their principal, they convert to language that is slightly more autonomous. They describe their decisions with a tone of self-determination. Kindergarten teacher Marianne Kincaid described the plan of action she and her teammates initiated after looking at math data for students in every grade.

She said:

We really delved into it at the beginning of the year, the areas that really needed to be looked at, hit harder, taught specifically, and if it's happening in second, third, fourth, fifth grade, it starts in kinder and first. I'm the team leader, so when we had parent-teacher conferences, we very specifically told parents this year a lot more about our math, and the math TEKS, and where to find those, and we handed them out so that parents would understand what that means. Because they're not aware of composing and decomposing numbers to 10. They're not aware of the language and what it means. Developmentally, [the students] may not be aware of what it means yet, but in first grade, they need to be.

Ms. Kincaid is holding firm to the idea that the math TEKS move at a pace that is too quick for many students, and she does not appreciate the fact that the learning standards that she has deemed developmentally inappropriate are now a requirement for her to teach. But that has not stopped her from developing a plan to inform the parents about how they can be helping out at home, and it has not crushed her determination to see her students succeed. As she put it, they may not be developmentally ready, but "they need to be."

Third grade teacher Judy Martin discussed the extended time it takes to develop lesson plans, interventions, and assessments for students at Valoma. She said:

Teachers are frustrated just because there's so much that we have to do, especially at a Title I school. With the documentation, and, you know. There's a lot of documentation. . . . It was very time-consuming. [My husband] was gone two days, and I thought, what the heck – and then I still wasn't done when he got back. But [Ms. Chadwick] likes data – and data's good, and this helps me.

I can understand Ms. Martin's frustration at having to spend so much of her free time putting together information about her students' progress, and I certainly heard the tone of resentment in her voice when she mentioned that the principal "likes data." However, I was surprised to hear a reversal in tone just a few seconds later, when she followed up by acknowledging that the data helps her as well. I am certain that it does, but I was surprised that she was able to get past her own resentment so quickly, and pick up a positive tone.

Second grade teacher Brianne Charmaund was battling a different problem; she was dealing with frustrations regarding how much reading there is on the third grade math exam. She worries for her students, and laments the fact that their reading skills might hurt them on more than one exam, and that their parents might not understand that their child could be good at math, but just wasn't assessed in a way they could comprehend. She explained:

What I've noticed from third grade math, and probably all of the math tests, is a lot less math calculations and "What math skills do you know?" It's more "What can you read" and "What do you understand about what the questions is asking" and "Can you take out information that's not important?" And I feel like that is really hard for kids. I feel like the kids that struggle with reading also then are going to struggle with math, even if they can do math computations and things like that. . . . I would love to see a clear-cut reading test, which I think they have a good reading test, and then a clear-cut math, "Can you do the math," because it's hard to say why did that child not understand that math. Why did they get that wrong? We just see a number. Yes, they got it right, or no, they got it wrong; we don't see their work. . . . But the way we get reports, it's just, you kind of guess. You don't know exactly what they did, or what was

confusing to them, or what they struggled with. But I think Valoma does a good job doing intentional problem-solving, and helping the kids really incorporate their reading as a part of the problem and they're working their way through it.

Ms. Charmaund also exemplified the positive attitude that her peers were able to demonstrate, and went on to discuss how the Valoma teachers had an exceptional focus on student vocabulary levels, as that can often make or break a student's understanding of a test question. These three teachers, like all of their peers, changed their language and their tone of voice when discussing their students. There was still plenty of frustration woven throughout the participants' descriptions of how they were coping within their own everyday practices, but no one seemed ready to give up on their students.

*Level of Coupling: Loose*

The level of coupling between Valoma Elementary and the policy-making body is loose throughout finding three, as the participants employ a markedly different tone and language when they are describing the need for accountability and how their teaching practices are affected by the rating. I believe that the reason for this difference is the principal. Her priorities for the school are clearly: (a) strong instructional practices, (b) a focus on student academic growth or progress rather than simply student achievement, and (c) the enrichment of education for students at Valoma with the inclusion of programs such as dual language. Although the teachers perceive that the school's rating has altered the campus culture at Valoma, they do not lay blame for that change at the feet of their principal, Ms. Chadwick. However, Ms. Chadwick's name does come up when they mention how their own teaching practices have been influenced.

The analysis here is clear that Ms. Chadwick does play a role in the loose coupling of her school to the Texas Legislature. Every node, or coding category, that was used to identify the data for finding three, was evaluated for signs of loose coupling using the seven possible functions, or dysfunctions, of loose coupling. Every single

participant was coded as describing a loosely coupled system at least one time while discussing either the value of accountability, or the influence of the principal, or the way they cope with the rating in the classroom. Two particular aspects of loose coupling stood out as clear identifiers that this finding differed from the first two.

The highest function, or dysfunction, of loose coupling that emerged from this finding was item six, which is that loose coupling leaves more room for determination by the actors (Weick, 1976). In the case of Valoma, this serves as a function of loose coupling, as the moods of the teachers improved greatly when they discussed their students and how they were going to deal with the challenges they faced. There were over 30 references to autonomy, and all but three teachers were identified as describing a situation in which the actors (teachers, in this case) were left with a significant amount of room for determination, or personal decision-making. The freedom to act as problem-solvers for their students has empowered the teachers to act as educational experts and take a leadership role in bringing the students up to the required academic level.

The second highest function of loose coupling that emerged from this finding was that some parts of an organization are allowed to persist, and will not have to respond to every little change in the environment (Weick, 1976). For this function, all but two of the teachers described situations in which a change made by the Texas Legislature might have caused them some strife, but they continued on their own course. There were 26 references to this notion of being allowed to persist. The assistant principal, Susan Richardson, described an example of this function as she discussed the use of accommodations for students served by the Special Education program during the STAAR test. She said:

You know, I said [to our teachers] : “Yes, you need to stop and look at whether the kid is eligible to use it on STAAR, but if you feel like this is something that helps them to be successful in your classroom, and access the curriculum, but we know they won’t be able to do it on

STAAR, I am totally okay with that.” It’s one day out of the whole school year, so I’d rather them be frustrated that one day. It will be really frustrating, and we’ll tell them “We know this is frustrating, just do the best you can.” But the other 179 days of the school year, we’re going to give them what they need to feel successful, because we don’t need to frustrate them every day of their life. (laughing)

One example of an accommodation is using a word processor for the writing exam.

Some students have disabilities that cause them to struggle to express themselves as easily as their peers, but can come back up to the level of their classmates with the use of a word processor. Students with dyslexia sometimes use this accommodation with great success, and it can be devastating when the accommodation is not allowed on the STAAR exam. Some schools, in order to prepare for the STAAR exam, will align their school accommodation practices to STAAR–approved accommodations only, in order to ensure the highest score possible. However, the use of the word processor is prohibited on the exam not because it is an inappropriate accommodation, but because it is too difficult to turn off the additional features available on a computer (dictionary, thesaurus, et cetera). Thus, schools are disallowing use of strong instructional practices simply to align to the rules of a test. That is why Susan Richardson’s directive to her special education teachers clearly demonstrates that Valoma is able to persist in their original course; they did not have to respond to the release of testing accommodation rules and immediately re-shape their daily practices to begin preparing for the STAAR exam.

In a school where the principal has a profound influence over the instructional practices of the teachers, it is interesting that they still use a language of autonomy and self-determination to describe their daily actions. I believe that this occurs because the teachers are able to recognize the distinction between Ms. Chadwick’s goals and the singular goal of achieving Met Standard. However; it is unclear to what extent Ms. Chadwick is controlling the level of coupling, as some teachers portray her as shielding

them as best she can, while other teachers portray her as caving to the pressure of the rating.

Art teacher Amelia Brand was explicit in her belief that the principal is protecting the teachers from further stress. She explained:

I know [the principal] is under a lot of pressure, and I think that she doesn't often show us that. I think she tries to lead from the position that we're doing what's best for kids, and she definitely is one to try to keep everyone positive. But I think that there are a lot more subtle pressures on her that we don't really see.

Three other teachers shared Ms. Brand's confidence in her principal's sole role as protector. However, three different teachers, including third grade teacher Virginia Simmons, voiced the value of the rating system, and directly attributed the school's success in achieving Met Standard to the actions of Ms. Chadwick. She said:

The schools that didn't meet standard, I really think it comes down to the principals didn't push the teachers, and the teachers didn't push the kids. I don't think we would have met standard if it hadn't been for our administrator. I really think that she is the number one reason why; she gets us the training we need, and she follows up. . . . I think the administrator is a big factor in this building. Huge. Huge! She sets the tone for us. And she's tough – she's tough on herself, and she's tough on us, and she's tough on the kids.

Based on most of the participants' views, Ms. Chadwick is indeed the key to the Met Standard rating. However, some of the teachers see Ms. Chadwick's protective shield as not so effective, if they recognize its presence at all. Some of the teachers feel tremendous pressure directly from the principal. Third grade teacher Judy Martin feels the weight of the responsibility to help her students grow by leaps and bounds, and she envisions a time when that responsibility could grow to a new level of pressure. She stated:

I think that she has us doing so much right now. I don't know how it could get any worse, but I think it could. And definitely, if we had Improvement Required, we would be doing more and more.

I am not sure if Ms. Chadwick's barrier of protection is starting to slip, and the teachers feeling this pressure are simply succumbing to the pressure of tight coupling to the Texas Legislature, or if Ms. Chadwick is using the pressure of the rating system to help provide a perspective of urgency, and is merely allowing the presence of tight coupling to permeate teachers' instructional practices when she requires more from the teacher than she feels they are putting forth. Either way, it appears that at Valoma Elementary School, the principal plays a significant role in the level of coupling between the school and the policy-making body.

#### Finding Four: Agreement on Policy Relief

There were three specific policy aspects that multiple participants wished to see altered or eliminated. Specifically, the campus participants focused on the removal of the pass/fail concept for elementary students, as they felt that this causes harm to the student that outweighs any benefit. They still wish to have an exam, and they want to see all of the data, but they want the passing rate removed. Almost all of the participants expressed a desire for the removal of ratings, although the teachers were much more vehement than the district administrators in pointing out that they still believe in some type of state-level accountability. Finally, the campus participants were interested in an accountability system that focuses almost entirely on student growth, looking at students on a developmental scale.

These three policy aspects, described in further detail below, speak to how strongly the participants feel about their effect on the campus culture and daily practices at Valoma, as they were held up as the primary legislative acts that would bring positive change for campus culture and for student achievement. This fourth and final finding does not include an analysis for the level of coupling, as participants were describing

specific suggestions for changing policy, and the analysis for loose coupling takes place in the descriptive moments when participants are discussing their current practices.

#### *Removal of Pass/Fail for Students at Elementary Level*

All of the Valoma teachers advocated in some way for the removal of the pass/fail requirement of the elementary STAAR exams. Some were in favor of removing the requirement further than elementary school. Others only mentioned third grade students when they were giving examples of why they found the pass/fail requirement to be inappropriate. Additionally, the assistant principal, Susan Richardson, mentioned the pass/fail component of the STAAR exam as her primary concern with the accountability policy. She was concerned with the long-term effect the concept of being an academic failure has on children at such a young age. “We have 8-, 9-, and 10-year-olds who think of themselves as a failure because they can’t pass that one test. And I don’t like that.” Ms. Richardson and all of the Valoma teachers feel strongly that it is detrimental to a student to label them as failing, and that the gains that come from the having test data do not make up for the ground that is lost when a child self-identifies as a struggling learner.

This logic came up over and over again with the teachers. Language acquisition specialist Michelle Wahler shared her thoughts on the subject. She said:

It’s so much pressure for little fourth graders. And if you want to test, wait. Wait for junior high and high school. Curriculum-based assessments, go ahead and get the district curriculum-based assessments and a snapshot. What’s going on in the classroom, a snapshot of the teacher, is she holding up the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, is she teaching with the TEKS, and with data?

Ms. Wahler, like almost everyone else, can see the reason for having the assessment, and is in support of collecting the data to use for instructional planning. Her concern lies in the failure of the student, and on the effect that label has on the child. Fourth grade teacher Juana Perez identified another overarching concern, which is that students are being burdened with the weight of being an academic failure, when they may just be

learning at a slower pace, or unable to express themselves in the way that the test requires. She explained:

I feel like a lot of kids are set up to fail, and that breaks my heart . . . and I understand – they've got to have the foundation before they can do the other things. But there are so very few choices available to them in the elementary level. You either get it or you don't - there's very little room for them to show their ability of their ways.

The way Ms. Perez sees it, by not allowing students to develop as learners over a window of time, we set them up to fail by setting an early marker on their grasp of reading and math concepts. Third grade teacher Virginia Simmons sums up the question that I know must have plagued policy-makers as they contemplated this system. She said:

I really think that there has to be some accountability somewhere, so that across the state, we know kind of where we fall. But I just – I wish that it didn't come back on the kids. I don't see why they have to know what their score is. Unless it's just really – no, I just don't see that they have to know what their score is.

If the state-mandated test is designed with a passing rate, it would be nearly impossible to keep campus results private. It is most likely that the parents would demand the test scores, so they would be released, and nothing would be different than our current system, except for the additional step of having to answer all of the parent requests for test scores. However, if the tests were designed without scores, it would be difficult for lawmakers to agree to spend so many taxpayer dollars on an exam that does not demonstrate a student's proficiency level in a subject area. The best solution to this conundrum is to continue to allow the district to use the test, if they wish to, but to eliminate the passing rate, and to lift the campus rating system in its entirety.

#### *Removal of Campus Ratings*

The Valoma teachers presented an interesting dichotomy in the discussion of whether or not the rating system should be removed. There seemed to be a strong need among some of them to indicate acceptance of the rating system in order to demonstrate

their merit. Jennifer Yates, in her second year as a teacher, shared her thoughts on the rating in terms of how important it is to her. “I feel like it was a pat on the back. ‘Great job, let’s celebrate! Okay, let’s keep swimming.’” But when I asked her to consider how a drop in the rating might change the campus, she had a stronger reaction. She said:

I feel like it would just be devastating to the teachers, because we all pour our entire heart and soul into our kids and into our jobs. I feel like it would just be a huge, like, slap in the face, and just ripping our confidence in what we do apart, because we really try to do our best based on everything that the district is throwing at us and based on all the research we look at, that would just be so defeating to not get Met Standard after all we feel like we do for these kids.

This anguish that Ms. Yates has tied to the campus rating seems related to her personal performance as a teacher. “We pour our entire heart and soul into our kids and our jobs” and it would be “just ripping our confidence in what we do apart, because we really try our best.” These are emotions that she describes as sharing with the Valoma teachers. It is different than the type of anguish demonstrated by third grade teacher Judy Martin. She explained:

I would take the ratings away. Absolutely take the ratings away. Because you can’t tell me that – I just don’t believe that in CTCISD there is a school where teachers aren’t working their tails off. I just don’t believe that. I believe some don’t work as hard as others – I mean, if you have economically disadvantaged kids, or kids who don’t speak the language, I think it’s a different set of problems. If you’ve got kids who have experiences, they have food, they have shelter, they have everything they need, I don’t think those teachers work as hard as teachers at, maybe, a Title I school, but they’re still working hard. They still care about their kids. They still go to after-school programs. I just don’t think [the community] sees that. They see a rating and then they judge.

Ms. Martin, who has taught for 30+ years, is more concerned about the overall fairness of the system; the unfairness for teachers everywhere, particularly teachers who work at a school that might have demographics that resemble Valoma’s. She identifies with all teachers across the ethnically and financially diverse CTCISD: “I just don’t believe that in CTCISD there is a school where teachers aren’t working their tails off.”

My initial reaction after noticing this split in motivation was to assume that every teacher who had the motivation of Ms. Yates would be a younger teacher, and every teacher whose feelings matched Ms. Martin would be an experienced teacher. However, my assumption was wrong, and there seems to be no obvious common factors within the two different mindsets. Either way, there does seem to be a clear dislike for the assignment of an unfair rating to a campus, regardless of whether the teacher's motivations for forming the perception were personal, or representing the collective teaching profession.

Dr. Calvin Robbs, assistant superintendent of CTCISD, summed this up with a comparison to the change in language on the state teacher evaluation system several years ago. He said:

People don't know what Met Standard is. It reminds me of when we changed the [Professional Development Appraisal System], and there was a lot of angst about the word Proficient. Proficient is a really good score, but no teacher wanted it, because they didn't understand – they had always been Exceeds Expectations or Clearly Outstanding. Now to take that off and say Proficient, you know, it's sort of the same kind of thing. We need to be a little more careful of what our words are.

Dr. Robbs makes an important point about the careful consideration that must be taken when assigning language to a label that will inevitably be used to describe the quality of someone's work. However, the general consensus among the teachers was that the complete removal of the rating would be best. The assistant principal and the superintendent also supported this position. Interestingly, Dr. Robbs and the campus principal, Ms. Chadwick, both seem to have accepted the campus rating system as a variable over which they have no control. Both politely answered my questions about what changes they might make to accountability policy if they had the opportunity, but were much more engaged and lively when answering questions about how our current rating system affects the work of educators and what we can do to cope.

As an observation, Dr. Robbs was a campus principal in CTCISD for many years; my experience in this district has led me to believe that Dr. Robbs is generally a well-respected district administrator, in part because of his long successful tenure as a principal. I find that the role of the principal is unique in its heavy responsibility to balance (a) the unending amount of problems that arise which require immediate attention, with (b) a great many long-term goals which include student academic achievement, staff performance, daily logistics, and more. The matching mindsets of Dr. Robbs and Ms. Chadwick lead me to believe that the special role of the campus principal shapes the thinking of a leader, to ensure that their focus remains firmly on items that have the largest impact for students.

#### *Stronger Focus on Student Growth*

The influence of the campus principal firmly impacted the campus staff, as the Valoma teachers overwhelmingly identified student progress, or student academic growth, as one of the most important things to measure. Even the parent that I interviewed, Sara Wilkins, identified the importance of student progress over pure student achievement. She said:

I like that, because I've seen the school . . . I did see those improvements. You can see the sliding scale on that. I think that's probably one of the best indicators of how the students are doing because it shows that they are being held accountable to what they can achieve. So it makes me feel better to know that kids that rank here, we're not just letting them sit there. Somebody's actually making the effort to start getting them up. Because a kiddo's not gonna do that on their own, somebody has to be there pushing them as they go. So that is one of the indicators that I really did like when I got the school report cards this year.

Ms. Wilkins identified one of the key benefits to measuring student growth, which is that students at all different levels of the achievement scale receive a more individualized learning plan. Students who are passing the state exam every year are not allowed to sit back and just pass but are instead pushed to reach their full potential. Students who are

underachieving on state-mandated tests in comparison with their peers can still recognize success when they make more than one year's worth of growth in just one school year.

Language acquisition specialist Valerie Hernandez shared how important this growth measure can be for English Language learners, as they sometimes make multiple years of academic growth each school year but might still be failing the state-mandated exam. It is important for those students to recognize their outstanding achievement so that they can maintain the motivation and continue their upward trajectory. She explained:

I just wish there was more of a focus on growth, because you've got kids coming in from Mexico, first year [in the country] in second grade, and when they exit out of [the ESL program] in 3rd grade or 4th grade, look at what they've done! That's powerful!

Even the art teacher, Amelia Brand, has focused her instruction around the concept of growth, and when asked about what she would change on the accountability system, her answer was a stronger focus on individualizing the instruction for the students' needs.

She said:

My biggest thing is I feel kids really do need time. Teachers need to be able to customize their instruction based on student need, without being tied to anything, but specifically, to meet those needs and grow from where the kids are.

Again, the influence of the principal seems to be a powerful force here, as her priorities have extended not only into non-testing grade levels, but also into non-testing subject areas.

Participants roundly agreed upon three changes to the current Texas accountability policy that they perceive would make an immediate and positive difference. They would like to see the removal of the pass/fail standard for elementary STAAR exams, the removal of campus ratings, and a stronger focus on student growth in the remaining pieces of the accountability policy. The Valoma stakeholders perceive that

these policy changes would alleviate the negative effects of the rating policy that they are currently experiencing.

#### Research Question Two Conclusion

There are specific factors that seem to influence the participants' formation of perceptions regarding the accountability rating. Some of these factors are stated outright, and some are identified as inner motivations, after they emerged through statements revealing conflicting emotions about the accountability rating system. All participants identified the value of accountability in general, and several even pointed to the current accountability system as an appropriate standard-bearer. But after careful consideration, it seems more likely that at Valoma, the principal is the true driver of accountability. In addition, the strong language of self-determination and autonomy from Valoma teachers belies loose-coupling between the school and the policy-making body as the discussion turns to instructional decision-making and daily practices in the classroom. The only question that remains here is whether the principal, Ms. Chadwick, is actively utilizing her position to control the level of coupling, or whether she is holding off the Texas Legislature with all of her strength, and the pervasive nature of the accountability rating policy is simply overcoming her effort.

## Chapter 7

### Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

Following is a brief review of the study, including research questions and overarching findings. Additionally, I will highlight a possible solution to policy questions as set forth by the superintendent of CTCISD, Dr. Barrington. Finally, this chapter will conclude with the limitations of the study and implications for policy, practice, and research.

### Overview of the Study

Educational accountability policy has surged onto the political vista with an urgency that has engaged the field of educational research. Since the 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education act, otherwise known as the No Child Left Behind act, scholars have acted with a speed and intensity like never before to understand the ways these policies affect the education system (Hanushek & Raymond, 2005; Hursh, 2005; Hursh, 2007; Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002; McDermott, 2007). The current Texas educational accountability policy affects over 8,000 schools and over 5,000,000 students; it is incumbent upon educational researchers to study how this policy affects the educational experience (Texas Education Agency, 2014 Pocket Edition Issues). This dissertation narrows that scope significantly, and examined the perceptions of local stakeholders (i.e. district- and campus-level administrators, teachers, and a parent) regarding the accountability ratings, using a case-study methodological approach at Valoma Elementary School – a diverse, suburban campus. Specifically, this study explored stakeholder experiences and perceptions about the ability of the rating to shape the daily practices and campus culture after its release, and the factors that seem to influence those perceptions. The research questions for this study were:

1. What are the perceptions of the Valoma Elementary School stakeholders regarding the influence of the Texas accountability rating on the daily practices and culture of their campus?
2. What factors seem to influence the formation of the Valoma Elementary School stakeholders' perceptions?

This research utilized a theoretical lens that examines the organizational relationship between Valoma Elementary School, and the accountability policy-making body, which in this case is the Texas Legislature. Loose coupling is the circumstance in which organizations are responsive to one another, but retain evidence of separateness and their own identity (Weick, 1976). Weick and Orton (1990) describe coupling as evident when elements affect each other: (a) suddenly, rather than continually; (b) occasionally, rather than constantly; (c) negligibly, rather than significantly; (d) indirectly, rather than directly; and/or (e) eventually, rather than immediately. This theory is a valuable lens for this research because “the concept of organizations as loosely coupled systems can have a substantial effect on existing perspectives about organizations” (Weick, 1976, p. 16). The seven possible functions or dysfunctions of loose coupling were utilized in the data analysis process of this dissertation. The essential core of this study is to understand how policy affects practice, and examining the perspectives about the ways in which these organizations interact has implications for this research.

#### *Research Design and Findings*

This qualitative dissertation utilized a case study approach to consider the perspectives of stakeholders at a public elementary school in the Central Texas Consolidated Independent School District (CTCISD), which is a school district serving more than 50,000 students in the north central region of Texas. Valoma Elementary School was selected as the case study site because of its diverse population, its success

in achieving the Met Standard campus rating in the Texas educational accountability system, and its availability to the researcher. Single interviews were conducted with 15 participants – two district-level administrators, two campus-level administrators, 10 teachers, and a parent. After being transcribed, interviews were analyzed and coded in NVivo using two separate coding processes.

Initially, each interview was reviewed for patterns and regular occurrences that were given simple titles, or codes. The first interview resulted in nine codes; throughout the analyzing process, new codes were added, and the previous interviews were reviewed again. At the end of this process, 27 codes were identified under four main themes: (a) effects of accountability, (b) student success stress, (c) conflicts and coping, and (d) solutions and moving forward. This process was used to develop four overarching narratives that emerged through the qualitative analysis process of explanation-building (Yin, 2014).

Immediately after an interview transcript was coded for patterns and regular occurrences, the data were reviewed again for evidence of any of the seven possible functions or dysfunctions of loose coupling as identified by Weick (1976). The purpose of this analysis process was to determine any possible links between: (a) the level of coupling between the elementary school and the policy-making body, and (b) stakeholder perceptions regarding policy implementation. This information was used to provide depth and context to the understandings of the participants as they identified their perceptions regarding the influence of the campus accountability ratings on the daily practices and culture of their campus, and what factors seemed to influence the formation of their perceptions.

The four overarching narratives that emerged from the explanation-building analysis, in collaboration with the loose coupling analysis, formed four primary findings.

Findings one and two correspond to research question one, identifying the perceptions of the Valoma stakeholders regarding the influence of the Texas accountability rating on the daily practices and culture of their campus. Findings three and four correspond to research question two, addressing the factors that seem to influence the formation of the Valoma stakeholders' perceptions.

#### Research question one

In seeking to understand how the Texas campus accountability rating of Met Standard affects the campus culture and daily practices of Valoma Elementary, participants revealed that they perceive the campus rating, sometimes identified as a realtor rating, to have a negative effect on teacher morale. This effect on teacher morale is finding one for this research; participants believe the complex nature of the accountability system causes schools with a high population of economically disadvantaged students to be unfairly judged, because community members inaccurately use the rating as a measure of campus instructional quality. Additionally, participants expressed that the test (which determines campus ratings) is developmentally inappropriate and is inconsistent with everyday best practices. Participants identified the pressure of ensuring strong student performance on this exam as a key contributor to an undue amount of stress on the shoulders of Valoma teachers. For this research, the additional heightened level of teacher stress caused by expectation of student performance is finding two.

The language used to describe finding one, the way the ratings affect teacher morale, included terms of helplessness and concession. When discussing finding two, the stress of seeking student success, the teachers still used language that describes a great deal of stress, but they also demonstrated passing occasions of self-determination when discussing their actual day-to-day work with the students. Thus, although the

overall level of coupling between Valoma and the Texas Legislature appears to be tight for research question one, there are instances of loosening that occur as teachers take back their autonomy from the state when discussing student success.

#### Research question two

In seeking to understand what factors influence the formation of participants' perceptions, an emergence of conflicting cognitive viewpoints helped to isolate the principal, Ms. Chadwick, as a determining factor in the level of coupling between the school and the policy-making body. Teachers expressed some inconsistent feelings regarding the Texas accountability rating system, sometimes expressing a great dislike for the policy that labeled them unfairly, and sometimes expressing gratification at being able to hold up their school rating as a testament to their strong instruction. Teachers also identified the principal, Ms. Chadwick, as a key factor in the campus accountability system, some even going to far as to note that it is Ms. Chadwick, and not the accountability rating system, that is the cause of the current passing campus rating of Met Standard.

This dichotomy of reflections regarding the accountability system, coupled with the identification of the principal, Ms. Chadwick, as the key purveyor of Valoma accountability, make-up finding three. The language throughout this finding, as teachers describe how they go about their everyday work while dealing with the accountability rating system, is significantly different than the language used in findings one and two. Participants clearly spoke with self-determination when discussing how they work with their students to achieve success, and they demonstrated autonomy from the Texas Legislature in describing how they maintain consistency of instruction for students throughout the turmoil of policy changes.

In finding four, the participants found common ground on three aspects of the accountability policy that they would prefer to see altered. Specifically, they would like to see the removal of the pass/fail standard on elementary STAAR exams, the removal of the campus rating, and a stronger focus on student growth in the remaining portions of the accountability policy. In doing so, they identified some of their chief factors in forming perceptions around how the accountability rating affects the daily practices and campus culture at Valoma.

#### *Final Note*

One final important discussion from this study emerged from the interview with the superintendent, Dr. Matthew Barrington. He described a plan that would resolve almost all of the problems observed by the Valoma teachers. Because he was able to describe possible policy solutions so succinctly, it seems like an ideal way to conclude the findings. Below is a brief summation of his thoughts.

#### A Possible Solution from the Superintendent

Dr. Matthew Barrington's tenure in the superintendency provided him with the time to develop relationships with his colleagues across the state. Over time, he began working closely with a specific group of Texas superintendents who held the same vision for transforming public education in Texas. The work of these superintendents has grown over time and developed into several different in-district and inter-district initiatives for school transformation that are still active throughout the state.

#### *Visioning History*

In 2008, a retired superintendent from the Northwest Independent School District named Keith Sockwell was working with an architectural firm called the SHW Group (Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas, 2008). He was working with superintendents throughout the state on various projects, and became absorbed with the

question of what the ideal vision for Texas public education might be. When policy-makers asked school superintendents to provide guidance on designing statewide education policy, the superintendents could often voice what they were against, but not what they were for. With the backing of the SHW Group, the Texas Association of School Administrators, and the Schlechty Center for Leadership in School Reform, The Visioning Institute emerged as an initiative to design a fully fleshed out vision of what educational leaders want for K-12 public education in Texas (Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas, 2008). A group of 35 Texas superintendents served as project participants, and over a 15-month timeline they participated in sessions that included discussions with experts in the field, developmental experiences for the superintendents, and extensive written and video documentation to preserve the thoughts and ideas from the group. This collaborative work and the document that it produced has served as the foundation for future initiatives around a vision for Texas K-12 public education, and some legislative work (Texas Association of School Administrators, 2013).

Dr. Barrington, superintendent of CTCISD, served in this original group, and continues to work with various initiatives around the framework initially introduced by The Visioning Institute. He notes that part of the foundation of this group arose from the concern of district leaders regarding the rating system. Dr. Barrington said:

That wouldn't have happened if a number of us were not, by that time, believing that the ratings system, the accountability system, was harming schools and harming children. The focus had moved away from, or had moved further from children, and more towards the ratings themselves, which had very little to do with local public schools, and nothing to do with the education of children.

Although this cohort of superintendents shared Dr. Barrington's strong feelings about the rating system, The Visioning Institute tackled not only accountability policy, but also a full vision of public education in Texas. The document has six different articles that focus on the diverse aspects of education: (a) the new digital learning environment, (b) the new

learning standards, (c) assessments for learning, (d) accountability for learning, (e) organizational transformation, and (f) a more balanced and reinvigorated state/local partnership. He described the reason for taking on the full picture of educational reform instead of just the current accountability policy:

What we soon found out was you cannot talk about assessment without talking about standards, and if you're going to start talking about assessment and standards, you're talking about an accountability system. And if you're going to talk about that, you've got to talk about a reinvigorated state and local partnership. So there's four of the six articles, and they're absolutely intertwined. You can't separate them; they're not independent of each other. And we've been working on that ever since, all [six] of them.

Using these six articles of a new vision of public education in Texas, Dr. Barrington was able to describe for me a situation in which the perceived influence of the accountability ratings described by participants in this study might be lifted. The key to this proposed scenario lies in the idea that the local community not only determines the accountability of its campuses, but takes a cooperative role in all aspects of the local education system.

#### *Local Accountability*

The development of a locally focused education system starts with the formation of a consortium that incorporates multiple levels of the educational organization, the community, and the surrounding cities and school districts. This is a process that CTCISD underwent with Dr. Barrington at the helm, so he speaks with experience on the topic of engaging the community in becoming a part of the local education system. He suggests bringing together the community members for a series of town hall meetings where the initial goal involves identifying and discussing the collective dreams for the children in the district. Dr. Barrington explained:

I'd have summits. I'd focus on the child, and the parent. I'd tell parents, 'Okay, the day your child was born, the first time you held them in your arms, do you look down at them and go I sure hope you pass the STAAR test, or I sure hope that you're commended.' You know, everybody always starts laughing. And then I ask 'then why are we putting such

emphasis on that if that's not what you really wanted? What is it that you wanted for that child? Let's work towards that.' . . . Storytelling is very effective. I have a few stories I tell all the time, and they illustrate what I'm talking about. . . . I tell a story about a family who had taken their kindergarten child to school for the first day, and the whole family walked him down there. I saw them, and I said 'where are you going?' And they told me and I said, 'you know, that's a great school, great principal, you're going to be fine.' But it took that whole family to take that child down there. They're not going down there to hope that he passes that test. They're going down there with all their hopes and dreams, and leaving that child with that teacher is an act of faith. And people get that. When we devise an accountability system, are we aiming it at that? Or are we aiming it at policymakers and people who don't care about your child, down at the capital, who want a number to tell them something that has nothing to do with this family's hopes and dreams? Every child has a name, and every child is different. I'd drive people that direction.

This detailed description of how Dr. Barrington would engage the community is the crux of his argument that a local accountability system would be successful. He stakes this system on the assumption that parents care deeply about their children's success in life, and that they are willing to take an active and committed role in their local educational system. He would also engage the other nearby towns and school districts in the conversation, to include as many areas of expertise as possible. During my interview with Dr. Barrington, I asked him to describe how this might work in a small town like the one I am from – Clovis, New Mexico, on the eastern edge of the state. I had seen a community summit process take place like the one he had described, but I had trouble picturing how this system might be applicable in a school system that is just a fraction of the size of CTCISD. Dr. Barrington said:

If I were in Clovis, I would go out to neighboring towns. Including crossing state lines – it's not specific to Texas, so you can go over there. Go to Muleshoe and Friona, and connect with some of those other districts, and Portales, and go, 'let's form a consortium.' Pull the people in.

Dr. Barrington firmly believes in making the best out of the assets you have access to, and that means reaching out to other experts in neighboring districts. He uses the CTCISD district staff as an example, but notes that as a larger school district, CTCISD

wasn't just creating networks; they were building the network in-house. CTCISD is large enough to require this kind of infrastructure, as the district serves more than 50,000 students, but that is larger than many small towns in Texas, much less school districts. Dr. Barrington notes that for smaller towns and school districts, they can collaborate and share work without having to create everything internally. He shared:

There are people that are talented. And you don't need as many people there. We needed, we have a whole lot of really talented people here, because it's a big district. We've also gathered people – we brought Melody Jameson in, [the new executive director of professional learning]. People come here now because, you know, Tom Bradford, he's brilliant, and he came over because of the things we're doing. . . . But smaller towns have talented people.

It felt to me as though Dr. Barrington were stopping me from making counter-arguments he has already heard one too many times. One concept he seemed to want to drive home during our interview was the idea that a large city with important business leaders is not a prerequisite for creating this kind of partnership between the community and the schools. He took multiple opportunities to reinforce the point that small towns can be trusted to care for their children, and that it might actually be inappropriate for that responsibility to be taken away by anyone else. Dr. Barrington said:

The things that we really value, the state doesn't have any business in. The state can't ask those kinds of questions, and they have no business. If you're in a farming community, out in West Texas, what do those folks value out there? They can tell you. Rosco, Texas, which is west of Sweetwater, has an early college program. They call themselves an early college now; they've got it on the sides of their vehicles. Roscoe is primarily a cotton-farming community, and now they have a lot of wind turbines. But they're smart enough out there, and they care enough to be determined about the things that matter to them. So I really think the state can trust local communities to come up with that.

This intense belief in the devotion of parents to their children drives Dr. Barrington's passion for this idea, as well as his plan for motivating the local stakeholders to rise to the challenge of responsibility. He stated:

Dr. Barrington would work with this collective group of community members and local education experts to design a series of goals for the students in the district, essentially creating a graduate profile. Simultaneously, he would begin work with the staff to begin the work of implementation of these ideas, by focusing on inspiring the teachers. Dr. Barrington said:

You've got to work simultaneously with the staff and the community. You don't wait for your staff's capacity – you can never have enough capacity built up. . . . Start building capacity – you know, the biggest most fundamental for staff, for teachers, is 'so are you doing the things that you got in this business to do?' You know, when I go out and have my lunches with teachers, I ask them that question. 'When you decided to go into the college of education and get your teaching certificate, what did you want to do? How did you envision teaching? Were you excited about it? If you were, what were you excited about? The ideal that you had, before you ever set foot in the classroom, what were you excited about?'

Here, with the teaching staff, Dr. Barrington taps the same motivational source, but he goes at it through the lens of the educator rather than the parent. He also works to bring together the teachers and the community in order to remove what he sees as the root cause of fear. He explained:

One reason people don't change – and they want to – but they're afraid of what will happen to them in the community if they do. So if you've got the community alongside them, and 'yeah, we're tired of those tests,' and 'yeah we do want something more for our kids,' and 'yeah, my highest hopes and dreams don't jive with a multiple-choice test.' Then people aren't as afraid of changing.

This sums up the logistics side of building a local cooperative partnership to oversee the accountability of the schools. Next, Dr. Barrington outlined what the state's role might be in this scenario, if they had the legislative backing to create a system that allowed for local control. In CTCISD, the initiative to create a powerful relationship between the community, and the schools, and other local school districts included all of the steps listed above; below, Dr. Barrington draws a picture of how relaxed state accountability policy could allow this partnership to flourish, to the benefit of students.

Although he doesn't see the need to throw out the current state exams, Dr.

Barrington does see a place to enhance their content. He said:

I've never said that we shouldn't have a test. It just shouldn't be reduced and not the only thing, and it should be a little bit broader than what it is. . . . One thing that we've proposed, the test would measure these power standards – not the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, but deep, essential, standards. And the state could even assess those with multiple-choice exams, though I think they should try to do more than that.

Essentially, he is amenable to keeping some form of state exam for data purposes, but he foresees an environment where the state test does not have the same punitive impact on the schools. Dr. Barrington is less concerned about the state trying to develop the perfect exam to measure the learning of students at specific grade levels and subject areas, because he does not believe that is the job of the state. He would much prefer to leave that up to the determination of local stakeholders, and he has many ideas on the different ways schools can assess students to both gauge their learning, and challenge them to rise to new levels that better meet the needs of 21st century learners. He shared:

I think it's possible – maybe not for the state but certainly locally – that we put kids in situations where they have to defend their work. In front of panels that are independent. Not necessarily teachers; business people, maybe, and parents. And examples of what they consider to be quality work that demonstrates the standards that we set for them. But there can still be state tests.

Dr. Barrington speaks quite passionately about two different topics: (a) the new and innovative ways we can engage our students, with the help of the community, and with a collaborative consortium of educators; and (b) the overreaching of the state in our current accountability system, resulting in the emasculation of the stakeholders most closely related to the actual students. He sees a lot of opportunities for exciting change, and a lot of opportunities missed due to the overbearing weight of the current rating system.

Below, he clarifies his point on returning the decision-making power to the local stakeholders.

What about stratified random sampling? We think that the state doesn't need to know what every child can do. Local school districts do, campuses do, but the state doesn't. The state needs to know – 'how are African American kids doing on our standards? How are Anglo kids doing? How are low SES kids doing? How are Hispanic kids doing?' You can assess that with stratified random sampling. The random sampling means you're generalizing to the population, you determine the margin of error, and the stratification means you've hit all these groups. And then the state can find that out, and you're not testing everybody. So it's less expensive, it's still valid and reliable, and it meets the needs of the state. The state's gotten to believe that they need to test every child. You think the Commissioner knows what Billy Smith is doing, or cares? No. He can't pay attention to that. I can't pay attention to that, you know. . . . I don't drill down to Billy Smith. The principal probably needs to do that. Certainly, the team of teachers needs to do that. But I – I don't need to. I've got more than 50,000 kids. And I can't do it – it's not my business. . . . You need to be clear, what is it you really need to know, and how do you rate that? How do you account for that?

The question that Dr. Barrington asks is central to the philosophical underpinnings of the Texas accountability rating system. He acknowledges that the idea that the rating system should be monitoring student population groups, that the state should ensure that one district is not slipping through the cracks unnoticed. However, he returns to the question – what is it that you really need to know, and how do you rate that? How do you account for that? Our current assessments are measuring what students know about a particular subject area on one day out of the school year, and then assigning the campus a rating based on those scores. Do we want to know how well our teachers are teaching? Do we want to know how high or low the quality of instruction is at a school? This is what the stakeholders of Valoma Elementary believe the rating is telling their community. I believe Dr. Barrington's years of experience in the superintendency have provided him with a broader lens of understanding how the dynamics of the state accountability policy affect Texas public schools, which is why his suggestions for transforming state accountability policy intrigue me, and why they are included in this

study. I believe the work of the The Visioning Institute could have direct implications on this field of research in future years, if it continues to grow and its tenets find a way to take hold in the Texas Legislature.

#### Limitations

This research has two primary areas of limitation. The scope of the study could be larger and deeper in order to ensure that the findings truly reflect the perspectives of the larger Valoma community, and the experience level and viewpoint of the researcher may affect the data analysis in the development of findings. I will address both of these issues in-depth below.

##### *Scope of the Study*

This study only included one parent interview, and the perspectives of a larger parent representation would have added a great deal of context from the point of view of heavily-invested stakeholders who are not education system insiders as the teachers and administrators are. Additionally, because a significant population of students come from Spanish-speaking homes, it would be beneficial to hear the voices of parents from both English- and Spanish-speaking homes. I believe the context of a language barrier would change the dynamic of this study, as so much of the focus seems to be on the opinions of white, middle-class, well-educated families from the neighborhoods around Valoma, when the majority of the school population reflects something entirely different.

Additionally, it is a limitation of this study that the participants were only interviewed one time. In order to ensure that the research reflects a clear picture of the overarching campus beliefs, it would be more appropriate to have follow-up interviews with participants in order to expand on some of their thoughts. The number of interviews conducted was limited by time, as it was necessary to begin data analysis in order to

meet the deadlines for submission of the dissertation to the graduate school for graduation.

#### *Researcher Point-of-View*

This particular research methodology is highly personal – “our observations cannot help but be interpretive, and our descriptive report is laced with and followed by interpretation” (Stake, 1995, p. 134). The value of the case study comes entirely from the quality of work produced by the researcher. Although I have strived to stay within the guidelines laid out by experts in the case-study field, it is my belief that interpretive skill improves with experience. Thus, it is important to note the researcher’s history of practice in case study research, which is nominal.

I perceive CTCISD to be understanding of different thoughts and opinions, and open to the different ideas of all of stakeholders, thanks in part to their approval of my research study. It may be that the participants I was interviewing do not see their school district in the same light. It is possible that teachers or administrators at the campus could have perceived my questions as seeking the ‘right answer.’ Additionally, because I perceive CTCISD to be open and understanding in terms of considering the different viewpoints of our many stakeholders, I may have been biased against recognizing the full meaning of a statement, if a participant was trying to get that context across to me.

In order to overcome these particular biases, I attempted to remain cognizant of these thoughts as I interacted with participants, and focused on avoiding any leading questions, or personally held assumptions. Additionally, throughout the data analysis process I tried to maintain awareness of any possible biases, continuing to weigh them against possible conclusions as I reflected on the data collection, and reviewed my interactions with participants.

## Implications

This research has implications for theory, research, practice, and policy. I will briefly address each of these sections, beginning with the use of loosely coupled systems as a theory in educational accountability policy research. By using the concept that Weick (1976) puts forth as a lens for understanding the organizational dynamic, I was better able to understand the experiences of the participants as related to the accountability rating. Specifically, using the seven possible functions or dysfunctions of loose coupling helped me to identify the level of coupling between the school and the policy-making body, and by understanding the level of coupling I was able to observe what appears to be a connection between the level of coupling, and the efficacy and self-determination of the teachers. In this particular case I was interested in understanding the level of coupling and how that related to the stakeholders' perceptions, but it may also be valuable to explore exactly how accountability policy affects the level of coupling between the school and the policy-making body at different types of schools (grade level, academic performance level, in states with different accountability policies). By more deeply understanding how accountability policy affects the level of coupling, and then understanding how the level of coupling affects different aspects of campus culture, it may be possible to provide policy-makers with new information on how accountability policy affects students.

This study is significant for research because it provides an in-depth look at how a state policy affects the everyday practice and culture at an elementary campus (Lee, 2010). In addition, it exposes some outcomes related to policy implementation that have yet to be explored in-depth, including the effect of a campus rating that is perceived to be determined by student population rather than by student performance on teacher self-determination and efficacy (Sallee & Flood, 2012). The significance for practice is most

prominent for campus principals, in that the teachers who participated in this study seemed to be heavily influenced by the principal's personal goals. Although the teachers described a great deal of stress and frustration related to the campus rating, their actions and self-determination seemed to be drawn from the principal. Thus, campus leaders might take note that a teaching staff expressing frustration due to the accountability system is still paying attention to the words and actions of their principal. Even though many of the Valoma staff expressed concerns that the rating system undermined their work by measuring the wrong attributes, they seemed determined to align philosophically under the certainty of what they actually valued as important, which positively affected their self-determination.

This research has significance for policy in that it contains a plan, outlined by the superintendent, for a more balanced state and local partnership. His time and work with a group of superintendents participating in the Public Education Visioning Institute, now carried on by the Texas High Performance School Consortium, and his years of experience as a superintendent in school districts both small and large, both rich and poor, have led him to believe that there is a better solution for Texas Educational Accountability. Although this study only seeks to understand the perspectives of stakeholders at one elementary school, it seems as though the plan for legislative change outlined by this superintendent would have addressed the concerns identified in this research.

#### Future Research Considerations and Conclusion

In future, it may be valuable for researchers to consider more deeply evaluating the relationship between the perception of the 'realtor rating' and teacher efficacy. In particular, in schools and school districts with more English Language Learners and a higher population of economically-disadvantaged students, how deeply-embedded is the

teacher belief that the rating is determined more by student population than it is by student performance? Do their perceptions affect their efficacy or self-determination, and how? And more importantly, does the plan for accountability outlined by this superintendent and The Visioning Institute meet the needs of any other concerns raised about Texas accountability? I believe there might be significant future research directions possible concerning the body of work produced by The Visioning Institute, and its implications over the past seven years (Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas, 2008). Additionally, it would be beneficial for researchers to explore the perceptions of stakeholders at a school that has not Met Standard recently or in past years. This perspective would provide additional information on how the accountability policy may affect those stakeholders who are more familiar with the interventions steps that come from failure to meet the prescribed goal.

It is through reflection and careful consideration that policy-makers can design the kind of changes that will improve K-12 public education in the U.S., and it is only through the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data that policy-makers are provided with the kind of information that can create the impetus for change. Stakeholder perceptions allow for a different kind of insight into the success of educational accountability systems. The decision to consider policy effects on the individual campus and individual teacher may hold great value in the way they affect the learning environment a child experiences every day.

Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Letter for District Administrators

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Courtney Hart. I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies in the College of Education and Health Professions at the University of Texas at Arlington. Under the advisement of Dr. Ifeoma Amah, I am currently working on my dissertation research, which examines how public school stakeholders (i.e. parents/ guardians, teachers, campus administrators, and district administrators) feel about the impact of the Texas educational accountability rating system (e.g. “Met Standard” or “Improvement Required”) on the everyday practices and school culture at the campus level. Specifically, I hope to explore both the perceived success and challenges of the rating system, as well as the perceived ability of the rating to shape the daily school activities and campus culture of Valoma Elementary School, after its release.

Because I am interested in conversing with district level administrators regarding the Texas accountability ratings, I am writing to see if you would be willing to participate in an interview. The interview will last between 1 to 2 hours and will occur at a location and time that is most convenient for you. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of all participants, the school, district and community throughout this study. In addition, there are no foreseeable risks and/or discomforts involved through your participation in this research study. For more information, I have attached the Informed Consent form, which provides further details regarding my research, and the role and responsibility of participants. If you decide to participate in this study, I will also bring a copy of this form to the interview meeting.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me (Courtney Hart) by phone at xxx-xxx-xxxx or by email at [courtney.hart@mavs.uta.edu](mailto:courtney.hart@mavs.uta.edu). Thanks for your time and support. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Courtney Hart

Doctoral Candidate

The University of Texas at Arlington

Appendix B

Participant Recruitment Letter for Valoma Elementary School Teachers

My name is Courtney Hart. I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies in the College of Education and Health Professions at the University of Texas at Arlington. Under the advisement of Dr. Ifeoma Amah (Assistant Professor), I am currently working on my dissertation research, which examines how public school stakeholders (i.e. parents/ guardians, teachers, campus administrators, and district administrators) feel about the impact of the Texas educational accountability rating system (e.g. “Met Standard” or “Improvement Required”) on the everyday practices and school culture at the campus level. Specifically, I hope to explore both the perceived success and challenges of the rating system, as well as the perceived ability of the rating to shape the daily school activities and campus culture of Valoma Elementary School after its release.

Would you be willing to participate in an interview regarding Texas accountability rating? The interview will last between 1 to 2 hours and occur at a location and time that is most convenient for you. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of all participants, the school, district and community throughout this study. In addition, there are no foreseeable risks and/or discomforts involved through your participation in this research study. For more information, I have attached the Informed Consent form, which provides further details regarding my research, and the role and responsibility of participants. If you decide to participate in this study, I will also bring a copy of this form to the interview meeting.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me (Courtney Hart) by phone at xxx-xxx-xxxx or by email at [courtney.hart@mavs.uta.edu](mailto:courtney.hart@mavs.uta.edu). Thanks for your time and support. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Courtney Hart

Doctoral Candidate

The University of Texas at Arlington

Appendix C

Participant Recruitment Letter for Valoma Elementary School Parent/Guardian

My name is Courtney Hart. I am a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies in the College of Education and Health Professions at the University of Texas at Arlington. Under the advisement of Dr. Ifeoma Amah (Assistant Professor), I am currently working on my dissertation research, which examines how public school stakeholders (i.e. parents/ guardians, teachers, campus administrators, and district administrators) feel about the impact of the Texas educational accountability rating system (e.g. “Met Standard” or “Improvement Required”) on the everyday practices and school culture at the campus level. Specifically, I hope to explore both the perceived success and challenges of the rating system, as well as the perceived ability of the rating to shape the daily school activities and campus culture of Valoma Elementary School after its release.

Would you be willing to participate in an interview regarding Texas accountability rating? The interview will last from 1 to 2 hours and will occur at a location and time that is most convenient for you. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of all participants, the school, district and community throughout this study. In addition, there are no possible risks and/or discomforts involved through your participation in this research study. For more information, I have attached the Informed Consent form, which provides further details regarding my research, and the role and responsibility of participants. If you decide to participate in this study, I will also bring a copy of this form to the interview meeting.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me (Courtney Hart) by phone at xxx-xxx-xxxx or by email at [courtney.hart@mavs.uta.edu](mailto:courtney.hart@mavs.uta.edu). Thanks for your time and support. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Courtney Hart

Doctoral Candidate

The University of Texas at Arlington

Appendix D

UT Arlington Informed Consent Document

## UT Arlington Informed Consent Document

### **PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR**

Courtney Hart, University of Texas at Arlington, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, [courtney.hart@mavs.uta.edu](mailto:courtney.hart@mavs.uta.edu) [REDACTED]

### **FACULTY ADVISOR**

Dr. Ifeoma Amah, University of Texas at Arlington, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, [iamah@uta.edu](mailto:iamah@uta.edu).

### **TITLE OF PROJECT**

A Case Study Approach: The Influences of the Texas Accountability Ratings on Local Practices at a Suburban Elementary School

### **INTRODUCTION**

You are being asked to participate in a research study about the Texas accountability ratings. Specifically, this study seeks to understand how campus accountability ratings affect the daily activities and campus culture of [REDACTED] Elementary School. Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate or discontinuing your participation at any time will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Please ask questions if there are anything you do not understand.

### **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to understand how stakeholders at [REDACTED] Elementary School feel the state educational accountability rating system impacts the daily activities and campus culture of [REDACTED] Elementary School. Specifically, this research will examine both the perceived success of the rating system, and the perceived ability of the rating to shape a campus after its release.

### **DURATION**

You will be asked to participate in one interview lasting between 1 to 2 hours, and if necessary, you may be asked to participate in a follow-up interview lasting between 1 to 2 hours.

### **NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS**

The number of anticipated participants in this research study is 40.

### **PROCEDURES**

The procedures, which will involve you as a research participant, include an interview lasting between 1 to 2 hours. The interview will be audio recorded. After the interview, the recording will be transcribed, which means it will be typed exactly as it was recorded,

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IRB Approval Date: **SEP 17 2014**

IRB Expiration Date:

## UT Arlington Informed Consent Document

word-for-word, by the researcher. The recording will be destroyed at the end of the study. The only identifying information will be your signature on this consent form.

### **POSSIBLE BENEFITS**

Possible benefits to conducting this study include sharing the perspectives of campus stakeholders (e.g. administrators, teachers and parents/guardians) with policy-makers. There is value in deeply understanding the impact of educational accountability policy on local practices, as it can help shape future policies to better serve the students it is intended to assist. This study will add to the current body of research looking at how policy affects practice, using the case study approach to develop awareness of how stakeholders at a diverse, suburban elementary school perceive the state accountability ratings to impact the daily activities and school culture of their elementary campus and school district.

### **POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS**

There are no perceived risks or discomforts for participating in this research study. Should you experience any discomfort please inform the researcher. You have the right to quit any study procedures at any time at no consequence.

### **COMPENSATION**

Participants will be offered a \$10 Sonic gift card for participating in this study.

### **ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES**

There are no alternative procedures offered for this study. However, you can elect not to participate in the study or quit at any time at no consequence.

### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to decline participation in any or all study procedures or quit at any time at no consequence. Choosing to participate has no effect on your relationship with the school or district.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Every attempt will be made to see that your study results are kept confidential. A copy of this signed consent form and all data collected including transcriptions from this study will be stored in a secure locked filing cabinet and password protected computer in [REDACTED] at the University of Texas at Arlington for at least three (3) years after the end of this research. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings without naming you as a participant. Additional research studies could evolve from the information you have provided, but your information will not be linked to you in anyway; it will be anonymous. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the UTA Institutional

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Review Board (IRB), and personnel particular to this research have access to the study records. Your records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above. The IRB at UTA has reviewed and approved this study and the information within this consent form. If in the unlikely event it becomes necessary for the Institutional Review Board to review your research records, the University of Texas at Arlington will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law.

**CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS**

Questions about this research study may be directed to Courtney Hart at [REDACTED] or [courtney.hart@mavs.uta.edu](mailto:courtney.hart@mavs.uta.edu), and/or Dr. Ifeoma Amah at [REDACTED] or [iamah@uta.edu](mailto:iamah@uta.edu). Any questions you may have about your rights as a research participant or a research-related injury may be directed to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services at [REDACTED] or [regulatoryservices@uta.edu](mailto:regulatoryservices@uta.edu).

**As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature and printed name of principal investigator or person obtaining consent      Date**

**CONSENT**

By signing below, you \_\_\_\_\_ confirm that you are 18 years of age or older and have read or had this document read to you. You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and have been told that you can ask other questions at any time.

You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits, to which you are otherwise entitled.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**SIGNATURE OF VOLUNTEER**

**DATE**

IRB Approval Date: **SEP 17 2014**

IRB Expiration Date:

Appendix E

Information Sheet for District Administrators

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Race/Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Hometown: \_\_\_\_\_

How many years have you served in public education? \_\_\_\_\_

How many years have you served in this school district? \_\_\_\_\_

How many years have you served in this particular role? \_\_\_\_\_

What different roles have you served in, here in CTCISD, and how many years in each?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What roles did you serve in before you came to this district, and how many years in each?

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\_\_\_\_\_  
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Appendix F

Interview Protocol for District Administrators

1. Can you share with me what your district leadership role entails?
  - a. Probe – how might your campus and district accountability ratings affect your role, if at all?
2. I have focused my research around Valoma Elementary School. According to the Texas Education Agency website, this school recently received the “Met Standard” rating. How important is this rating to you, as a district leader? Why?
  - a. Probe – how do you perceive that campus administrators value the rating? Why?
  - b. Probe - how do you perceive that teachers value the rating? Why?
  - c. Probe - how do you perceive that parents/ legal guardians value the rating? Why?
3. What are your thoughts on these “Met Standard” ratings in comparison to how you might rate this school, if we strictly consider the indicators used in the accountability system? Or, worded another way and applying the question to a broader context, do you consider the accountability system to be an effective instrument at measuring its stated indicators? Why or why not? (Note: I will have a handout with the rating and indicator information available)
4. If you were to rate schools, or if you were designing accountability indicators for a rating system, what other indicators might you include?
  - a. Probe - in what ways could those indicators be included in a statewide rating system?
5. As you consider our statewide accountability rating system, how do you interpret the different ratings? In other words, what is the scope of influence that you, personally, assign to a school rating when you think about a campus?
  - a. Probe – can you explain why you have come to assign that particular level of importance to a rating?

6. In what ways do the accountability ratings affect the district, and/or the individual campus, if at all?
  - a. Probe (if they believe there was influence) - do you perceive it to be more positive, more negative, or neutral, on an overall level?
  - b. Probe - do you perceive that others have an understanding of the accountability rating? Parents? Teachers? Community members? Etc.
  - c. Probe - if not, what do you think their understanding is?
  - d. Probe - if you perceive that other stakeholders have a misunderstanding of the accountability rating, do you believe that education of what the rating truly entails would change how the rating shapes the campus?
7. As policy-makers contemplate change for accountability systems in public education, is there anything that you would like to share with them?
  - a. Probe - are there any "words from an educational leader" that come to mind?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not yet covered?

Appendix G

Information Sheet for Campus Administrators

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Race/Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Hometown: \_\_\_\_\_

How many years have you served in public education? \_\_\_\_\_

How many years have you served in this school district? \_\_\_\_\_

How many years have you served in this particular role? \_\_\_\_\_

What different roles have you served in, here in CTCISD, and how many years in each?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What roles did you serve in before you came to this district, and how many years in each?  
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Appendix H

Interview Protocol for Campus Administrators

1. Can you share with me what your role of (assistant) 'principal' entails?
  - a. Probe – how might campus accountability ratings affect your role, if at all?
2. According to the Texas Education Agency website, the most recent state accountability rating that your campus received is “Met Standard.” What components are measured in that rating?
  - a. Probe – within the indices, what did your campus have to achieve in order to get that rating?
  - b. Probe – what components are not included in the rating, if any?
3. How important is the rating to you, as the (assistant) principal? Why?
  - a. Probe - how do you perceive that teachers value the rating? Why?
  - b. Probe - how do you perceive that parents value the rating? Why?
  - c. Probe – how do you perceive that the other campus administrators value the rating? Why? What about district administrators? Why?
4. What are your thoughts on the “Met Standard” rating in comparison to how you might rate your campus, if we strictly consider the indicators used in the accountability system?
5. If you were to rate this school, what other indicators might you include?
  - a. Probe - how might those indicators change this school’s rating if they were included in the rating system?
  - b. Probe - in what ways could those indicators be included in a statewide rating system?
6. As you consider our statewide accountability rating system (e.g. the indices), how do you interpret the different ratings (e.g Met Standard and Improvement Required)? In other words, what is the scope of influence that you, personally, assign to a school rating when you think about a campus?

- a. Probe – can you explain why you have come to assign that particular level of importance to a rating?
7. In what ways has the accountability rating affected this campus, if at all?
- a. Probe (if they believe there was influence) - do you perceive it to be more positive, more negative, or neutral, for your campus on an overall level?
  - b. Probe - do you perceive that others have an understanding of the accountability rating? Parents? Teachers? Community members? Etc.
  - c. Probe - if not, what do you think their understanding is?
  - d. Probe - if you perceive that other stakeholders have a misunderstanding of the accountability rating, do you believe that education of what the rating truly entails would change how the rating shapes the campus?
8. In what ways has the met standard rating affected you, if at all?
9. As policy-makers contemplate change for accountability systems in public education, is there anything that you would like to share with them?
- a. Probe - are there any “words from an educational leader” that come to mind?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not yet covered?

Appendix I  
Information Sheet for Teachers

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Race/Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Hometown: \_\_\_\_\_

How many years have you served in public education? \_\_\_\_\_

How many years have you served in this school district? \_\_\_\_\_

What grade level do you teach at Valoma Elementary? \_\_\_\_\_

How many years have you served in this particular role? \_\_\_\_\_

What different roles have you served in, here in CTCISD, and how many years in each?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What roles did you serve in before you came to this district, and how many years in each?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Appendix J  
Interview Protocol for Teachers

1. Can you share with me what all you do at \_\_\_\_\_ Elementary? What all your role as a teacher entails?
  - a. Probe – how might campus accountability ratings affect your role, if at all?
2. According to the Texas Education Agency website, the most recent state accountability rating that your campus received is “Met Standard.” What components are measured in that rating? Or, put another way, that rating is made up of a series of informational snapshots about your school. What are those informational snapshots, and what all do they entail?
  - a. Probe - what major components, or informational snapshots, are included in the rating?
  - b. Probe – within these components, what level did your campus have to achieve in order to get that rating?
  - c. Probe – what components, or informational snapshots, are not included in the rating, if any?
3. How important is the rating to you, as a teacher? Why?
  - a. Probe - how do you perceive other teachers value the rating? Why?
  - b. Probe - how do you perceive that parents value the rating? Why?
  - c. Probe – how do you perceive that campus level administrator(s) value the rating? Why? What about district level administrators? Why?
4. What are your thoughts on the “Met Standard” rating in comparison to how you might rate your campus, if we strictly consider the indicators used in the accountability system?
5. If you were to rate this school, what other indicators might you include?
  - a. Probe - how might those indicators change this school’s rating if they were included in the rating system?

- b. Probe - in what ways could those indicators be included in a statewide rating system?
- 6. As you consider our statewide accountability rating system, how do you interpret the different ratings? In other words, how much importance do you, personally, assign to a school rating when you think about a campus?
  - a. Probe – can you explain why you have come to assign that particular level of importance to a rating?
- 7. In what ways has the accountability rating affected this campus, if at all?
  - a. Probe (if they believe there was influence) - do you perceive it to be more positive, more negative, or neutral, for your campus on an overall level?
  - b. Probe - do you perceive that others have an understanding of the accountability rating? Parents? Community members? Etc.
  - c. Probe - if not, what do you think their understanding is?
  - d. Probe - if you perceive that other stakeholders have a misunderstanding of the accountability rating, do you believe that education of what the rating truly entails would change how the rating shapes the campus?
- 8. In what ways has the met standard rating affected you, if at all?
- 9. As policy-makers contemplate change for accountability systems in public education, is there anything that you would like to share with them?
  - a. Probe - are there any “words from the practitioner” that come to mind?
- 10. Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not yet covered?

Appendix K

Information Sheet for Parent/Guardian

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Race/Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Hometown: \_\_\_\_\_

Profession: \_\_\_\_\_

How many children do you have, and what grades are they in? Or, if they are not in school, what are their ages?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

How many years has your child attended Valoma Elementary?

\_\_\_\_\_

Appendix L

Interview Protocol for Parent/Guardian

1. I understand you have a child in the \_\_\_\_\_ grade here at Valoma. Can you share with me your child's educational history? Has it all been from this school?
  - a. Probe – what was the series of events that brought you to this school?
  - b. Probe – what did you know about the school before you child began their education here?
  - c. Probe – did anything you knew/learned ahead of time play a part in your decision to enroll your child at this school (or move to this neighborhood so you could enroll your child at this school)?
  - d. Probe – are you familiar with the Texas Educational Accountability rating system?
  
2. According to the Texas Education Agency website, the most recent state accountability rating that your child's campus received is "Met Standard." There are so many different factors that go into a school's rating! Through conversation, the news, your own research, or the school newsletters, have you learned about any of the different parts of that rating? If so, please share with me what all you have learned.
  - a. Probe - what different things does this rating include, or, what all is it measuring?
  - b. Probe – within the different things being measured, what did your child's campus have to achieve in order to get that rating?
  - c. Probe – what components, or informational snapshots, are not included in the rating, if any?
  - d. Probe – where did you learn about all of this?
  
3. How important is the school rating to you, as the parent? Why?
  - a. Probe - how do you think other parents value the rating? Why?
  - b. Probe - how do you think the teachers value the rating? Why?

- c. Probe – how do you think the campus administrators value the rating?  
Why?
    - d. Probe – how do you think the district administrators value the rating?  
Why?
- 4. The “Met Standard” rating that your child’s school received is made up of many different calculations, including the percentage of students that passed the STAAR exam, a measure that calculates whether or not students are making progress from year to year (based on STAAR scores), student participation rates on the STAAR tests, student attendance, and dropout rates. What are your thoughts on the “Met Standard” rating, in comparison to how you might rate your child’s campus?
- 5. If you were to rate this school, what other indicators might you include?
  - a. Probe - how might those indicators change this school’s rating if they were included in the rating system?
  - b. Probe - in what ways could those indicators be included in a statewide rating system?
- 6. How important do you, personally, consider a school’s rating to be when you are thinking about a campus?
  - a. Probe – can you explain why you have come to assign that particular level of importance to a rating?
- 7. In what ways has the accountability rating affected your child’s campus, if at all?
  - a. Probe (if they believe there was influence) - do you perceive it to be more positive, more negative, or neutral, for your campus on an overall level?
  - b. Probe - do you perceive that others have an understanding of the accountability rating? Other parents? Teachers? Community members? Etc.

- c. Probe - if not, what do you think their understanding is?
  - d. Probe - if you perceive that other stakeholders have a misunderstanding of the accountability rating, do you believe that education of what the rating truly entails would change how the rating shapes the campus?
- 8. As policy-makers, like the Texas Legislature, contemplate change for educational accountability systems in public education, is there anything that you would like to share with them?
  - a. Probe - are there any “words from a parent” that come to mind?
- 9. Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not yet covered?

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### Biographical Information

Courtney Hart was born in Clovis, New Mexico, and grew up in the home of two music educators; she began first grade at Barry Elementary where her mother was a music teacher, and graduated from Clovis High School as a member of the Wildcat Band Program which was led by her father. She attended the West Texas A&M Band Camp from the age of 12, and eventually went on to earn her Bachelor's in Music Education from West Texas A&M University. After obtaining a Master of Music in Oboe Performance from the University of North Texas, Hart took a position as a middle school band director in a large suburban school district.

With an eye for systems and a keen principal serving as a mentor, Courtney developed of new interests in the area of state-mandated assessment. After six years as a band director, she joined the office of assessment and accountability as a district administrator. Soon to follow was a new position with the title of "Innovator" that still has her working with different programs, schools, and grade levels all over the district.

Hart primarily credits her musical background with channeling her drive and purpose; she continued to teach at the West Texas A&M Band Camp for several years after transitioning into administration, and still performs with various groups around the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex. She would be delighted to return to her hometown of Clovis, NM, someday to serve the students of Clovis Municipal Schools, and give back to a city that she loves.

Away from school she enjoys following the musical pursuits of friends and family; her brother Brad and her sister-in-law Glenda both marched in the Phantom Regiment Drum & Bugle Corps, and she has been a fan of The Cavaliers for many years as well. Most recently, she has been following her brother's growing drumline program which is bringing the art form to an entirely new community.