

The Impact of “No Child Left Behind” on the Learning Culture of Predominantly African American Schools

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No Child Left Behind, or NCLB, is a controversial education act created to ensure the academic success of all students. It has been suggested, however, that NCLB has varying effects on the learning cultures of African American and lower socioeconomic minority groups of students. The current study examines, retrospectively, the effects of NCLB on the learning cultures of predominantly African American public schools in a small town in western Alabama. Specifically, this research reports the results of a survey of classroom teachers' perceptions of the learning culture of their schools since implementation of NCLB. This research has determined that teachers see some benefits but are also concerned about changes in the learning culture that have resulted from the implementation of this act.

After the Civil War in the United States and with the emergence of public school systems in the southern part of the United States, African Americans were separated into schools that received less money in state expenditures per child, maintained poorer facilities, had fewer library books and other material educational advantages, and provided little or no transportation for students seeking to attend school. These inequalities continued well after the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision that declared segregated schools unequal in 1954. The inequalities continued until legal mandates required the systems at hand to make a change (Arc-hung & Walker, 2003). The No Child Left Behind Act is our government's most recent attempt at that change.

NCLB

In 2001, the creation of the No Child Left Behind Act, which will be referred to as NCLB, was developed to ensure that all students receive

adequate education. NCLB was signed into law January 8, 2002 and is the latest revision of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The overall purpose of the law is to ensure that all children in America are able to meet the learning standards of the federal government and the state where they live.

NCLB is built on four key principles: accountability for results, flexibility and local control, enhanced parental choice, and instruction based on scientific research (Sattes & Walsh, 2002). NCLB substantially increases the testing requirements for states and sets a more rigorous accountability standard for schools within each state, with the use of yearly progress objectives for all students and subgroups of students. These subgroups include those of lower socioeconomic background, minority race/ethnicity, limited English language proficiency, and disability.

The specific goals of the law, as spelled out in the *Federal Register* issued on March 6, 2002, are as follows: (a) all students will reach high standards, at a minimum attaining proficiency or better in reading and mathematics; (b) all students will be proficient in reading by the end of third grade; (c) all limited English-proficient students will become proficient in English; (d) all students will be taught by highly qualified teachers; (e) all students will be educated in learning environments that are safe, drug-free, and conducive to learning; and (f) all students will graduate from high school (Dunn & Ruiz, 2002). The goal of the NCLB is to provide a valid set of requirements for the accountability and performance of all students which are directly related to positive expectations set by teachers and schools.

The NCLB Act has immediate implications for states that must put new testing and accountability systems into place. In addition, the requirements of the NCLB have implications for all educators and educational researchers who focus on K-12 education. The implications for teachers and school administrators derive from the requirements of the law that schools demonstrate steady gains in student achievement and close the gap between various subgroups of students (Baker, Betebenner, & Linn, 2002).

In 2002-2003, the national annual achievement target was established. The April 2002 standardized exams served as the baseline for establishing results of students' academic performances. These results were used to determine the yearly progress needed to ensure schools reach the goal of 100% of students meeting standards by 2013-2014. The failure of schools to adequately achieve the improvement status, that is, to meet the academic standards set by their district, has the following consequences: schools must offer parents the option for their children to either attend a better-performing public school within the district or refer children for supple-

mental educational services. The State Board of Education is required to define the criteria and then solicit, evaluate, select, and distribute a list of approved providers of supplemental educational services (Dunn & Ruiz, 2002).

Learning Cultures

In order for schools to meet the new academic requirements there must be adequate learning cultures provided for students. Learning culture reflects how well the culture of the school encourages learning by students, staff, and administrators. It reflects the extent that the school emphasizes learning rather than passive compliance. An ideal learning culture is a safe but exciting place to be. It encourages curiosity and exploration, and gives teachers the opportunity to reflect on their practices, work with others, and develop new ways of teaching (Sattes & Walsh, 2002). A strong learning culture:

... encourages everyone who walks in its hallways to become excited about learning and to set high expectations for their own and others' achievement. A strong learning culture is customized to the school community that it supports. (Sattes & Walsh, 2002, p. 2)

In a high performance culture, colleagues and peers support one another's efforts and resources. School leaders take action-oriented approaches to achieve such cultures in school settings. The ultimate goals of encouraging high aspirations in the academic learning culture are to create an environment that is conducive to high achievement for students and extraordinary performances by adults (Corallo, McDonald, Sattes, & Walsh, 2003). While there are many definitions of culture in the research literature, two beliefs are central to high-performing learning communities: (a) all students can learn at high levels and (b) teachers' actions matter (Sattes & Walsh, 2002).

African American students' learning cultures. It is especially important to understand the learning culture of African American students for teaching and testing purposes because research continues to show that white students continue to score higher than African American students on tests of academic achievement at the elementary and secondary levels (Archung & Walker, 2003). White students are also more involved in extracurricular activities, attend schools with better-trained teachers, and learn in environments that are more orderly. According to researchers

Archung and Walker (2003), African American students are more likely to be disciplined, suspended, and placed into special education classes. Most scholars attribute the difference in scores to cultural and environmental factors that are in the schools themselves. Researchers have also argued that African American students bring their own unique cultural styles to education and are often misunderstood by white teachers who do not understand or appreciate these traditions.

Criticisms of NCLB

Critics of No Child Left Behind have observed that, unless considerable flexibility is allowed in the interpretation of some aspects of the accountability components of the law, it seems likely that many more schools will be classified as needing improvement than can actually be provided with effective assistance. Such an outcome could seriously undermine the law's commendable goals of substantial improvement in instruction, learning for all students, and closing the achievement gap (Baker et al., 2003).

Complaints are voiced in many sectors. Some of the criticisms of NCLB come from state capitols; most state budgets are in the worst shape they have been in for decades, and NCLB is adding to the budget crises. Management experts are saying that changing education is almost impossible under the best of circumstances, and that trying to do it top-down goes against the advice of just about everyone who knows anything about organizational dynamics. Traditional conservatives believe the newer conservatives are taking power away from the states and giving it to Washington. Many parents do not believe that decisions about grade retention and graduation should be based on a single paper-and-pencil test that overrules the judgment of parents and professionals who have spent hundreds or thousands of hours observing and working with students. Minorities, the physically challenged, those for whom English is a second language, and those who have been forced to attend poorly equipped schools oppose tests that fail to take relevant variables into account (Brady, 2003).

Current Research Focus

The current study attempted to assess the impact of NCLB on the learning culture of predominantly African American schools in a school district in Alabama.

Methods

Population and Setting

Questionnaires were distributed to teachers at the six predominantly African American schools. Information from the district office of the school system was used to select schools that met the demographic criteria to be in this study, more specifically, that had majority African American enrollment. Six schools met these criteria, but materials were returned from only four schools (a high school, middle school, and two elementary schools), all of which serve mostly students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Measures and Procedures

The Impact of No Child Left Behind Questionnaire (see Appendix) is an adaptation of the Continuous School Improvement Questionnaire developed at the Appalachian Educational Laboratory (AEL), also known as the Regional Educational Laboratory (Cowley & Meehan, 2003). For the purposes of this research, the questionnaire was modified to measure the impact felt on schools’ learning culture since the implementation of the NCLB Act. Experts in the education field (two Professors of Education) conducted a pretest on the modified questionnaire in order to ensure accuracy, lucidity, and scholarship in its presentation. Questions measured the areas of school goals, teacher behavior, and the learning process. The original 70-item questionnaire was modified into 30 items and three open-ended questions. The 30-item questionnaire was divided into three components and checked for reliability. The category “teacher behavior” included questions 1-13, 19, and 20; its alpha was equal to .9613. The category “school goals” included questions 14-18 and had an alpha equal to .7842. The category “learning process” consisted of questions 21-30 and had an alpha of .9157. The alpha values show that each group of items has strong reliability. Open-ended questions addressed the effects of implementation of NCLB on classroom dynamics, teacher qualifications, and the benefits of the act.

Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the school system as well as each school’s principal. Teachers were asked to participate in this study to further the knowledge and understanding of how the No Child Left Behind Act was impacting the learning culture of their classrooms. The questionnaire asks the participants to read each item and then rate to what extent each statement is true for their school since NCLB was implemented, on a scale of 1-3, “1” indicating that the feature described is not present, “2” meaning somewhat present, and “3” meaning present to a high degree.

Results

Analyses were conducted using the SPSS program for item ratings and qualitative analyses for responses to the open-ended questions.

A total of 36 teachers participated in the study although only 27 teachers' responses were analyzed because of incomplete responses from 9 participants. The 27 teachers were comprised of 22 females and 5 males, and 16 African Americans and 11 whites, with school experience ranging from 1-30 years. An ANOVA was conducted to test the possible impact of demographic variables (gender, race, and total number of years of teaching experience) on teachers' scores on the Impact of NCLB Questionnaire. The analysis revealed no significant impact of these variables except for the number of years of teaching experience which did, in fact, affect the teachers' perception of NCLB.

Analyses addressed three general factors that comprise a learning culture or academic environment: a) teacher behavior, b) school goals, and c) learning processes. Teachers were placed in three categories based upon their years of teaching experience: 4 years or less (Group 1), 5-15 years (Group 2), and 16 or more years (Group 3).

Table 1 below summarizes teachers' sub-scores on The Impact of NCLB Questionnaire. Average scores and standard deviations for each sub-group as well as for the total group of 27 are shown. The scores can range from 1-3, which reflects the ratings assigned to each item by the teachers. A score of "3" would indicate, essentially, that teachers strongly agree that NCLB has resulted in improvements in the area addressed whereas a score of "1" would indicate that the teachers do not think that NCLB has resulted in changes in that area.

Table 1. Teacher Ratings on "The Impact of NCLB" Questionnaire

Teachers' Experience	Teacher Behavior		Learning Process		School Goals	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Group 1 (1-4 yrs)	2.10	0.11	2.08	0.13	2.55	0.18
Group 2 (5-15 yrs)	1.61	0.19	1.48	0.16	2.49	0.17
Group 3 (16 yrs or more)	2.32	0.16	1.78	0.19	2.60	0.20
All Teachers	2.01	----	1.78	----	2.55	----

Teacher Behavior

As shown in the table above, teachers’ overall responses indicated that they thought NCLB has resulted somewhat in improved teacher behaviors (average score of 2.01). Analyzed by average number of years experience, teachers’ responses ranged from a high of 2.32 for teachers with 16 or more years of experience to a low of 1.61 for 5-15 years of experience. ANOVAs indicated that group 3 differed significantly from group 2 ($p < 0.028$). This was the only significant difference found; group 1 did not differ significantly from group 2 or group 3.

Learning Process

When asked about the effects of the implementation of NCLB on the learning process, there were significant differences in opinions between teachers in groups 1 and 2 ($p < .008$.) The teachers’ average response was that the learning process has changed somewhat (average score of 1.78). Average scores by groups ranged from a high of 2.08 for teachers having less experience to a low of 1.48 for teachers with 5-15 years of experience. Teachers teaching less than four years agree more that the learning process has changed since the implementation of NCLB; teachers teaching between five and fifteen years are less likely to agree.

School Goals

When asked about the effects that NCLB had upon school goals, teachers’ responses overall suggested that teachers agree there have been significant changes in school goals; average scores were higher overall for these items, ranging from 2.49-2.60 across sub-groups. There were no significant differences between groups (average score of 2.55). The perception that school goals have significantly changed since the implementation of NCLB is consistent with the high achievement standard that is associated with NCLB. Although teachers overall seemed to feel that each school had changed its goals, there were differences in opinion on how positive these new goals are, as discussed below.

Although teachers’ ratings on the questionnaire suggested many see the learning environment as improved since NCLB, teacher comments in response to the open-ended questionnaire mostly expressed concerns about implications of NCLB factors such as rigorous accountability standards, increased testing of students, inclusion of special needs students in regular classrooms, increase of student to teacher ratios, and the extreme focus on test preparation by teachers for students. Some of the teachers’ comments follow:

Question #1. How has the implementation of NCLB affected your classroom dynamic? Many of the concerns were related to students with special needs:

Special Education students integrated into regular classrooms helps them, but hurts the other students.

SPE students need more 1 on 1 that regular education teachers are unable to give due to time [constraints].

Too many basic students in regular classes.

Question #2. Have you been required to go back and obtain further education to teach since the implementation of NCLB? Below are two illustrative comments:

Since I was taught how to teach and not what to teach, I am not qualified to teach under NCLB.

We are continually working to further education to maintain certification.

Question #3. Do you feel that the implementation of NCLB has benefited the student population? Comments varied but mostly expressed concern about the focus on test scores and implications for the students' future well-being:

We teach the test, whatever the test may be. Test scores are the driving force now more than ever.

There is a constant pressure of having to teach so that test scores will rise—a love of learning is secondary.

Those who are willing to work will get a good education.

Kids do not value or know to value authentic learning opportunities that prepare them for life.

Conclusions

This analysis showed that there were no significant differences in the responses of teachers based on their race and gender. However, some significant differences of opinion were expressed by teachers depending upon their total number of years of teaching experience. Overall, the statistical analysis showed that teachers with 1-4 or 16 or more years of teaching experience are less concerned about the negative effects of the act. Those in the intermediate group of 5-15 years rated their learning cultures least favorably. Teachers with less than 4 years of experience were more likely to agree that there has been somewhat of a positive change in the learning process since the implementation of NCLB, with those teaching 5-15 years being less likely to agree that there has been a positive change. Teachers with 16 or more years of experience were more likely to agree that teacher behavior has been affected positively since the implementation of NCLB; those teaching between 5-15 years were again less likely to agree that there has been a positive change. Regarding school goals, there was congruity across teachers' responses; all three groups agreed that NCLB has had a significant effect on their school goals.

Many teachers are concerned about the changes in the learning culture as a result of NCLB, specifically in the area of teacher behavior and school goals. Teachers seem to feel that, overall, school goals have been set at a high standard which requires children to work harder but also influences teachers to focus heavily on test preparation and less on developing good learning skills in students. Specific concerns addressed range from the questionable focus on standardized test scores to the difficulties of teaching classes and maintaining their own credentials.

Limitations

The initial sample was small, and two of the six identified schools did not participate in this study, further limiting the sample size. Also, because this research was conducted in the summer, the opportunity for follow-up meetings and second distributions of surveys was limited. Furthermore, the research involved only one school system in a small town, so research in different settings is needed. Research also focused only on teachers' perceptions.

Future Research

Future researchers should focus on the students' perceptions and actual performances as well as identify contributions of poverty and literacy levels to this issue of learning cultures in predominantly African American schools as it is related to the implementation of NCLB.

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Appendix

Impact of No Child Left Behind Questionnaire

Directions:

Read each item and then rate the extent to which it is true for your school. Using a scale of 1 to 3 for your ratings, with a “1” indicating that the behavior is “Not present” and a “3” indicating that the behavior is “Present to a high degree,” completely fill in the bubble that represents how well you believe your school performs.

Not Present	Present to some extent	Present to a high degree
1	2	3

- 1.) Teachers use a variety of instructional practices since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 2.) Teachers are searching for new ways to improve their teaching since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 3.) Teachers question established instructional procedures for the purpose of improving student learning since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 4.) Teachers help students develop a feeling of being able to control their own futures since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 5.) Teachers are striving to improve their own effectiveness since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 6.) Teachers incorporate opportunities for higher-order thinking since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 7.) Teachers use instructional practices that stimulate learning more often since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 8.) Teachers engage students in problem-based learning since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3

- 9.) Teachers seek feedback from other teachers to improve their teaching since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 10.) Teachers in this school are more open to innovation since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 11.) Teachers are more likely to continually look for ways to improve their own performance since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 12.) Teachers provide opportunities for students to reflect on their learning since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 13.) Teachers have more time to reflect upon their teaching since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 14.) Since the implementation of No Child Left Behind, new goals have been adopted to replace old goals. 1 2 3
- 15.) School goals focus on results for students since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 16.) School goals focus attention on priorities since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 17.) Decisions regarding use of resources—time, money, space, etc.—are made by reference to how well they contribute to school wide goals in Tuscaloosa since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 18.) Teachers have the resources needed to teach the curriculum for their grades/courses since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 19.) Both teachers and school administrators support instructional experimentation since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 20.) Teachers, administrators, parents, and students work as a team to foster learning at this school more so, since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 21.) School leaders facilitate others in seeking solutions to problems, rather than prescribing solutions since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3

- 22.) Students interact more frequently during the learning process since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 23.) All students are considered capable of learning since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 24.) Students are more likely to continually look for ways to improve their own performance since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 25.) Students are challenged more to think critically since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 26.) Instructional practices enable students to engage in self-directed learning since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 27.) Assessment of student learning is directed to a greater extent of improving (rather than just monitoring) student performance since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 28.) There is evidence that the rigor of the curriculum enhances student learning since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 29.) Groups have been established at this school to participate in shared decision making since the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3
- 30.) Mistakes are viewed as opportunities for learning rather than failures as a result of the implementation of No Child Left Behind. 1 2 3

Short Answer:

How has the implementation of No Child Left Behind affected your classroom dynamic?

Have you been required to go back and obtain further education to teach since the implementation of No Child Left Behind? Yes ___
No ___ Explain _____

Do you feel that the implementation of No Child Left Behind has benefited the student population? Yes___ No___ Explain_____
