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Does the No Child Left Behind Act Help or Hinder K-12 Education?

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has had notable effects on K-12 education, yet the views of teachers have rarely been considered in the debate over the effects and effectiveness of NCLB. Since teachers as a profession are explicitly charged with implementing the policies handed down by the federal and state governments, their attitudes and assessment of the legislation and its effects play a significant role in how these policies are viewed, implemented, and evaluated. This research examines the ways in which National Board Certified Teachers, as highly accomplished educators, view how NCLB impacted their professional practice and their status as professionals.

In the spring of 2007, we conducted an online survey of National Board Certified Teachers in California, with over 740 respondents. We asked teachers about their overall assessment of No Child Left Behind, as well as many questions relating to the impact of NCLB on three dimensions of teacher professionalism: their technical areas of practice, the service ethic of teaching, and their professional commitments. The survey results indicate that some teachers indicated that NCLB helped to organize and focus on core subject matter, to plan better, and to increase teacher expectations for student learning. However, they also felt that the depth and differentiation of curriculum was sacrificed, creating an overly narrow conception of the meaning of education. Some teachers felt that NCLB made it difficult for teachers to get through to unmotivated students, while many felt that NCLB had a negative effect on teacher enthusiasm. Overall, 84 percent of teachers surveyed reported unfavorable attitudes towards NCLB.

During the process of reauthorizing No Child Left Behind, policy makers will attempt to make improvements by studying national test results and debating ways to improve them. Our results suggest that future changes to NCLB should be informed by the perspectives of teachers, particularly those who are highly trained and have National Board Certification. The classroom experiences and professional expertise of these teachers should be important considerations in future efforts to improve student learning through legislative efforts such as NCLB.

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Introduction

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act—passed with bipartisan support in Congress in 2001—increased federal support for public education in the United States, while at the same time tying continued federal support to improvements in individual student outcomes. NCLB reflected the ideals of the standards-based education reform movement in the United States. Bipartisan support for the law drew from calls for improved accountability, and the expectation that the law would help close racial disparities. In many ways, NCLB fundamentally changed the way teaching and education was conducted in U.S. schools by requiring annual testing of school children and demonstration of “adequate yearly progress” for every subgroup on those tests. NCLB also requires schools to provide after-school tutoring and other services for poor-performing students, and mandates that schools hire only “highly qualified” teachers.

Studies of the effects of NCLB on student learning showed some early benefits on standardized tests of academic skills, followed by a period of little change. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), sometimes referred to as “the Nation’s Report Card,” provides the most reliable national trend data. This data showed progress on mathematics and reading scores both before and after the passage of NCLB. It also showed some narrowing of the achievement gap between whites and under-represented minorities (Institute of Educational Science, 2009). This narrowing plateaued shortly after the introduction of NCLB (Fuller, Wright, Gesicki, & Kang, 2007). In 2009, NAEP scores for fourth graders in mathematics were flat and results were only slightly improved for eighth graders (Institute of Educational Science, 2009). International studies show no measurable change in the percentage of either U.S. fourth- or eighth-graders performing at or above the advanced international benchmark in mathematics between 1995 and 2007. The U.S. continues to lag well behind many developed countries on mathematics and science achievement (Institute of Educational Science 2007).

From its inception, NCLB provoked strong responses from the educational policy community, with proponents arguing for the value of accountability and focusing on core skills and opponents arguing that the Act provided an overly narrow concentration on a few subjects, an overly narrow conception of the meaning of education, and too much concentration on multiple choice tests as a measure of students’ academic skills (see Brint and Teele 2008). Many groups have joined the debate over the value of NCLB, including national and state education officials, policy bloggers, and teachers’ unions. One group, however, has been virtually ignored in the debate about NCLB: teachers. Teachers have been at the front lines of change. Their experiences with NCLB are consequently of great interest and potentially highly germane to the policy debate.

Prior Research

Only a few studies of teachers’ responses to NCLB have been published. Early research showed that teachers found that NCLB did not improve instruction or the curriculum, but instead focused instruction on tested subject areas, ignoring those subjects not tested (Sundeman, Tracey, Kim, & Orfield, 2004; Tracey, 2005). Research by Brint & Teele (2008) found that 80 percent of 300 Southern California teachers surveyed expressed an overall unfavorable attitude towards NCLB. Teachers who were unfavorable to NCLB cited its negative effects on teacher creativity, the heightened importance it placed on multiple-choice testing, and its devaluation of teachers’ pedagogical skills and experience.

Previous research focused on all teachers, both novices and veterans, working in particular schools or school districts. Our approach is different; we focus on highly accomplished teachers. We do so for several reasons. First, rank and file teachers may not be the best judges of the legislation. New teachers have been trained in the premises of the accountability movement and do not have an alternative against which to compare it. Veteran teachers may be less committed to the accountability movement. Second, highly accomplished teachers are in a good position to judge both the effectiveness of the legislation and whether it takes advantage of the skills and experiences that teachers can offer. Because they have fulfilled particularly rigorous certification requirements, their commitment to the success of the public schools is likely higher than that of most rank-and-file teachers. Their views of the legislation are consequently imbued with a sense of what education can accomplish at its best.

Survey of Highly Accomplished Teachers

The goal of our research is to determine how highly accomplished teachers perceived the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act’s impact on their practices in the classroom and
their status as professionals. For the purposes of this research, we define highly accomplished teachers as National Board Certified Teachers. These teachers have completed a far more rigorous certification process than their colleagues.

We chose our sample of highly accomplished teachers from lists of National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs) in the state of California. Those attempting to gain National Board Certification undergo a rigorous, voluntary, year-long process, in which candidates must demonstrate high levels of subject matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and classroom effectiveness through performance-based assessment. Throughout the certification process, successful candidates are required to demonstrate that they are capable of utilizing appropriate assessment techniques to improve their classroom practice.

We conducted an online survey in the spring of 2007 to examine teachers’ assessments of NCLB. The survey investigated the views of National Board Certified Teachers concerning how the No Child Left Behind Act affected their teaching practice and their attitudes towards both their students and their teaching. Survey items also investigated NBCTs’ perceptions of the strengths, weaknesses, unintended consequences, and changes to the teaching profession brought on by the NCLB legislation.

Some school districts in California were unable to provide contact information for National Board Certified Teachers in their districts. In addition, some school districts failed to provide lists of NBCTs, though these lists may have existed in district offices. A national list of NBCTs with the necessary contact information was not available. These limitations prevented us from pursuing a random sampling approach. Of the 2,595 e-mails sent to NBCTs inviting participation, 2,406 subjects received the e-mailed invitation. Thirty five responses were disqualified (the survey had missing identifying information or the respondent was not a California public school teacher), and 740 responses were included in the analysis, which represented 31 percent of those initially contacted.

Thus, we have an aggregate voice of a large number of highly accomplished teachers in California. The number of respondents to our study was large, but not necessarily representative of all NBCTs in California. Teachers were more likely to respond if they worked at schools with higher Academic Performance Indexes (API) and lower percentages of students enrolled in the Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) program. Since respondents from state-designated program improvement (PI) schools were less likely to respond, an important goal for future research will be to find ways to improve the sampling of highly accomplished teachers in poor, inner-city schools.

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The Meaning Of Teacher Professionalism

Drawing on previous studies on the dimensions of professionalism in teaching (Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994), our survey asked highly accomplished teachers to assess the impact of NCLB on three dimensions of professionalism: (1) technical areas of practice, (2) the service ethic of teaching, and (3) professional commitment.

As many social scientists have emphasized, professions historically have embraced both technical expertise and service ideals (see, e.g., Brint, 1994; Greenwood, 1957; Wilensky, 1964). Professional commitment is also frequently mentioned as an important factor relating to the privileges, responsibilities, and autonomy of professions (Freidson, 2005). We describe these concepts in more detail shortly. Our questions about teacher professionalism also drew from the California Standards for the Teaching Profession (CSTPs). California has developed and promoted CSTPs, which aims to guarantee high levels of professionalism of teachers in the state. Teacher performance assessments in many districts are tied directly to the California Standards. Thus, teachers are judged both by how well they fulfill the CSTPs and also by how well their students perform on the annual examinations to determine adequate yearly progress for accountability purposes.

NCLB’s Impact on Technical Performance

The technical qualities of teacher professionalism address the expert knowledge teachers possess and specific applications of that knowledge in an educational setting. Our research used two elements from the CSTPs to articulate specific teacher professional practice: (a) Understanding and Organizing Subject
Matter for Student Learning and (b) Planning Instruction and Designing Learning Experiences for All Students. Understanding and organizing subject matter dealt with how teachers “use their knowledge of student development, subject matter, instructional resources and teaching strategies to make subject matter accessible to all students” (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 1997, p. 11). As a result, this standard addressed the complex choices a teacher makes in designing a curriculum. Similarly, these decisions were actualized in the instructional process, whereby teachers planned instruction that built on the prior knowledge of students, established clear learning goals, sequenced short and long-term plans, incorporated overall expectations, and utilized instructional strategies that could be modified based on student responses.

Figure 1 reports on instructional elements related to the technical dimension of teacher professionalism. In this figure (as well as subsequent figures related to the service and commitment dimensions of teacher professionalism), we contrast the proportion of teachers who said that NCLB was “definitely” or “somewhat” helpful in achieving a California Standard to the proportion who said that NCLB made accomplishing the Standard “more difficult.” We do not include the proportion of teachers who said NCLB had no impact on their capacity to achieve the standard.

As we can see, in no case did the majority of respondents find NCLB to be helpful as a source of improved instruction. However, sizable minorities (between one-third and two-fifths) saw NCLB as providing incentives to organize subject matter effectively, plan better, focus on core subjects, increase expectations for student learning, and to see all students as capable of learning. Somewhat smaller, but still notable, minorities (one-quarter to one-third) said that NCLB helped them to cover content in a timely manner and to support student understanding of key concepts, themes, and perspectives. Only 10 percent said that NCLB made it more difficult for them to focus on core curriculum and skills. This suggests that one potential advantage of NCLB from the perspective of these highly qualified teachers is that it leads to more intense focus on a limited number of core skills. However, this also implies that skills currently considered “non-core” may be relatively neglected, a finding confirmed by other studies (see, e.g., Brint & Teele, 2008; Sunderman et al, 2004).

Most respondents did not find NCLB to make their job more difficult either. However, sizable minorities (between one-quarter and two-fifths) said that NCLB made it more difficult to design curriculum to with the individual interests and learning needs of students in mind and to increase student enjoyment for learning. One-quarter found NCLB to pose a barrier to students’ in-depth understanding of materials and critical thinking, though an equal number of teachers found it helpful. So while teachers did not see coverage sacrificed, they did see that the depth of students’ experience with course content knowledge can be compromised by pressures to show annual yearly progress on standardized tests.

Additional questions about technical aspects of teacher professionalism were adopted from Brint & Teele’s (2008) survey. These responses showed some additional problematic points of the legislation, as noted by highly accomplished teachers. Three out of five (61%) of NBCTs surveyed felt that one of NCLB’s weak points was that it created an overly-narrow conception of the meaning of education. Substantial minorities of the teachers surveyed said that NCLB diminished creativity (46%), failed to make use of teachers’ professional skills and experience (40%), and took time away from some important subjects (32%). Similarly, three out of five NBCTs surveyed (59%) felt that NCLB had unintended consequences. Of those who saw unintended consequences, more than three quarters (77%) indicated that NCLB resulted in less creativity in the classroom. More than half (53%) reported that NCLB had increased the influence of textbook companies to determine the content and pace of instruction.

These highly accomplished teachers were also critical of the
potential impact on the teaching profession. Almost 60 percent of the teachers said NCLB would significantly affect the teaching profession. Of those, 86 percent indicated that teachers would focus on test performance to the detriment of other important aspects of education. Sixty-three percent believed that teachers would come to teach to scripts designed by publishers. Two fifths (41%) of teachers responded that NCLB would cause teaching to become a de-skilled occupation. By contrast, only about one fifth (19%) believed that teachers would develop more effective techniques because of NCLB, and fewer still said that teaching would become a more skilled occupation (7%).

**NCLB’s Impact on the Service Ethic**

The service ethic of teacher professionalism consists of two related elements: caring for students and expectations for student success. Caring for student deals with a teacher’s sense of responsibility and caring for all students as individuals. Equally important, however, is the notion that students will be able to achieve success.

The highly accomplished teachers in our survey saw some positive features in NCLB’s impact on the service dimensions of teacher professionalism (Figure 2). Relatively few of the NBCT respondents (ranging between 11 percent and 18 percent) said that NCLB made it more difficult to maintain expectations for student success. One-third of the respondents responded that NCLB helped them to increase their expectations about how much students should learn, while 27 percent answered that NCLB helped them to believe that all students would be able to learn aspects of their subject matter. Almost a quarter of NBCTs surveyed indicated that NCLB helped them to think that there was a great deal that teachers could do to ensure that most of their students achieve at a high level. Some other questions yielded split decisions. Approximately half of all National Board Certified Teachers indicated NCLB did not affect teachers being available to students, showing they cared for their students, or feeling that they made a difference in the lives of their students.

At the same time, these highly accomplished teachers also found some negative impacts of NCLB on the service ethic of teachers. Almost one quarter of teachers surveyed felt that NCLB made it more difficult to get through to difficult or unmotivated students or prevent students from dropping out of school. Three in ten teachers felt that NCLB made it more difficult for teachers to make learning fun for students. Only one in five said that NCLB helped them believe that most of their current students were capable of learning the material they should be teaching them. Only 15 percent said that NCLB helped teachers to consider how the attitudes and habits of students influenced their chances for academic success. This finding is consistent with other responses.

**NCLB’s Impact on Professional Commitment**

The California Standards include questions concerning teachers’ effort and enthusiasm for work, their motivations for professional development, and their loyalty to the profession. As indicated in Table 3, most respondents found little impact in this area. More than half of NBCTs surveyed maintained that NCLB had no impact on their efforts beyond that usually expected of teachers. Approximately 40 percent of respondents indicated that NCLB did not affect teachers being available to students, showing they cared for their students, or feeling that they made a difference in the lives of their students.
them: in their personal improvement each year as a teacher and in their eagerness to hear about ways to improve their teaching.

**Figure 3. Impact of NCLB on commitment dimensions of teacher professionalism**

Sizable minorities — one quarter or more — reported that NCLB had lowered their commitment and loyalty to the profession. Almost one quarter (23%) of respondents said NCLB had a negative impact on how they felt about the subject they most frequently taught, while a little more than one quarter of those surveyed maintained that NCLB had a negative effect on their loyalty to the teaching profession. Additional survey items, not reported in Table 3, showed that one-third of NBCTs said that NCLB decreased teacher motivation. Similarly, one quarter (26%) indicated that NCLB created “too much stress” for teachers. Moreover, nearly 40 percent of teachers surveyed indicated that NCLB had a negative influence on their own enthusiasm for teaching, a telling statistic about the impact of NCLB on teacher satisfaction, given the higher-than-average levels of commitment among these highly qualified teachers.

**Teachers’ Overall Assessment of NCLB**

We examined these teachers’ overall assessment of NCLB using a four point scale: very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, and very unfavorable. Eight-four percent of NBCTs surveyed reported overall unfavorable attitudes towards NCLB, a finding similar to those in prior studies (Brint & Teele 2008, Sunderman et al. 2004). This finding demonstrates continuing widespread disapproval of the impact of No Child Left Behind, not only among rank-and-file teachers but also highly accomplished National Board Certified Teachers.

We conducted a regression analysis using teachers’ backgrounds and attitudes as independent variables and their overall assessment of the legislation as the dependent variable. The regression results showed that teachers who had a more negative overall assessment of NCLB were most concerned about the effect of NCLB on the skill level of teachers. They were significantly more likely to say that NCLB failed to make use of teachers’ professional skills and experience, took time away from important subjects, led to lessened creativity in the classroom, and would cause teaching to be less rewarding. They were more likely to say that NCLB improperly narrowed the conception of education to reflect only material covered on tests. They were also more likely to say that NCLB set unrealistic goals and harmed their ability to work effectively with minority students.

The minority of teachers who had a more positive overall assessment of NCLB focused on improvements in teacher accountability. They were also more likely to say that it would cause teaching to become a more skilled occupation, that it pushed teachers to develop effective techniques to increase student performance, that it provided a clear focus for schools, and that it had good intentions.

**Conclusions**

Highly accomplished teachers expressed mixed views about the consequences of the No Child Left Behind Act. Although few were enthusiastic supporters, sizable minorities credited the Act with increasing the focus on core skills, encouraging planning and organization of lessons, and creating higher expectations for student performance. But a large majority expressed an overall negative assessment of NCLB. Their criticisms focused on concerns about individualized student learning, declining creativity in the classroom, weakened relationships between teachers and students, and the lack of understanding and respect for the skills and experience of teachers. These highly accomplished teachers were skeptical, and in some cases angry, about the consequences of NCLB for the nation’s school children. This is a problematic outcome of the legislation, if only because these are precisely the teachers the public schools can least afford to lose.

During the process of reauthorization, policy makers will attempt to make improvements in NCLB by studying national test results and debating ways to increase test results through adjustments in the law. Our results suggest that future changes to NCLB
should also pay attention to building on and rewarding the professional practices of teachers. The teachers we surveyed expressed important hesitations about the consequences of high-stakes testing for the development of critical thinking, creativity, and the representation of untested subjects. They also expressed concerns about the tendency of the law to diminish the importance of individual students’ interests and learning needs. The teachers we surveyed are among the most qualified teachers in the public system, and they are experienced hands in the classroom. Their views of the legislation should be taken seriously.

Although few were enthusiastic supporters, sizable minorities credited the [No Child Left Behind] Act with increasing the focus on core skills, encouraging planning and organization of lessons, and creating higher expectations for student performance.

Unfortunately, teachers have been sidelined rather than included in the process of policy debate. At present, the Department of Education has 13 classroom teachers in the Teaching Ambassador Fellowship program, a U.S. Department of Education effort to involve teachers in national education policy. This number is insufficient for teachers to make their voices heard. Furthermore, the National Governors Association committee to create a common framework of content and skills does not include a single classroom teacher. Our research, in addition to other studies, suggest that highly accomplished teachers can bring important insights to the table on policy reform, ranging from ways to stimulate student motivation to the types of skills that should be tested and the ways to harness teacher skills and experiences to the goal of improving student performance.

Notes

1 NCLB assessments of adequate yearly progress are based on state-developed tests, which are not comparable in rigor. Studies have indicated that gains in some states and school districts are more illusory than real, the result of reducing the difficulty of tests (Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago, 2009), the elimination of low-scoring students from testing (McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Heiling, 2008; Nichols & Berliner, 2007), or the outright manipulation of test results by school districts (Nichols & Berliner, 2007).

References


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