Perceptions of Students and Educators on the Impact of No Child Left Behind: Some Will and Some Won’t

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Abstract
How do students and educators perceive the No Child Left Behind law and its impact? The author reports on structured interviews with 15 staff members K-12 and 37 middle level students in a small, northeastern coastal community. The responses of students included three themes: fairness to subgroups, student effort and self-determination, and apprehensions about changing schools. Issues identified by teachers, special educators and administrators included: desirable effects of accountability; concerns about fairness to students with disabilities and diverse learning needs; conflicts between state and federal requirements; and negative effects on teaching, learning and allocation of resources. Most respondents recommended that the law be amended to achieve the original intent. Of particular relevance to special educators in small or rural schools is the overall challenge identified by educators of finding time to balance the often apparently competing demands of existing initiatives such as individualized instruction, curriculum of place, community involvement, and development of functional skills, with the additional bureaucratic and assessment related demands required by No Child Left Behind.

The latest version of the Elementary and Secondary Act, renamed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), includes new accountability requirements that are impacting every school district in the United States in some way. What impact are these requirements having on students and teachers in small or rural districts? In this article the author shares perspectives on this question attained through structured interviews with a cross section of K-12 staff members (teachers and administrators) and a randomly selected group of students in grade seven in a small, northeastern public school district.

The goal of the law, as when first enacted in 1965, is to increase educational opportunities for students who are at a disadvantage educationally, culturally, or socioeconomically (Schmidt & Harriman, 1998). The purpose of the current accountability features is to measure, publicly report, and then decrease the achievement gap between more advantaged students and other students who might be expected to be at a disadvantage by nature of membership in a subgroup (i.e., students with disabilities, students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, students for whom English is a second language, and students from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds.) The method for doing so is to require states to test every child in core subjects every year from grades 3-8 (and one high school grade) and then to report test scores along with extensive demographic data. The law also has accountability provisions related to teacher qualifications that have had a significant impact on teachers and administrators.

Haycock (2004) of the Children’s Trust reports that data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicates that significant progress was made in closing the achievement gap for some groups of students for a period of time. However, since the 1990’s those achievement gains have leveled and in some cases the gaps have widened again. For example, in mathematics, the average score for 17 year olds on the NAEP showed fairly steady improvement between 1982 and 1999. The average score in math for African American and Latino students improved from as much as 40 points lower than that of White students in 1973 to only a 20 point gap by 1990. However, by 2000, the gap had increased again to 32 points (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2000).

Historically, combating the negative effects of poverty has been a major focus of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Yet, poverty continues to be negatively correlated to achievement. Only 11% of poor students scored at the proficient or advanced level in math at grade 8 on the 2003 NAEP test compared to 37% of affluent students (U.S. Dept. of Commerce). If students who met standards at a basic level are included, 78% of students from affluent backgrounds achieved at least a basic level compared to only 47% of students living in poverty. This pattern of achievement has long-term implications reflected in the statistics related to college graduation rates. By age 26, 60% of students from high income families have graduated from college compared to only 7% of students from low income families.

Providing federal dollars to local school districts to increase equity in learning opportunities for all students is admirable and meaningful for ACRES’ (American Council for Rural Special Education) constituencies, the professionals and parents serving students in small and rural schools. Many students from rural areas who are at the greatest disadvantage are members of more than one of the subgroups under consideration. For example, the high school graduation rate for American Indian and Alaskan Native students is approximately 57% compared to 87% for White students and the college graduation rate for American Indian and Alaskan Native students is less than 1% compared to 33% for White students (US Dept. of Commerce, 2002).

Having a disability may compound the challenges facing students. In 1999-2000, the average graduation rate (students who earned a standard diploma) was 56%
for students with disabilities compared to 69% for all students (US Dept. of Education 2002, Greene & Forster, 2003). Yet, for American Indian or Alaskan students with disabilities the average graduation rate was only 48% and for Black students with disabilities the average graduation rate was only 40%. Further subgroup analysis by category of disability reveals more disparities. The average graduation rate for students with disabilities ranged from 40% for students with mental retardation and emotional disturbance to 68% for students with speech or language impairments and other health impairments.

Therefore, the purpose of the accountability features of the No Child Left Behind Act, to better document inequities in educational outcomes, appears to be consistent with a mission to improve the outcomes for students in small or rural schools who may be most educationally at risk. Certainly, these children should not be “left behind.” The question is whether the methodology, high stakes annual standardized testing and public reporting on yearly progress of subgroups, effectively addresses this mission. How is this approach affecting stakeholders at the local school level?

In large part, the strategy of reporting Annual Yearly Progress is designed to pressure educators to take whatever measures are necessary to increase achievement as measured by standardized tests. As the targets for Annual Yearly Progress increase from year to year, they create considerable pressure on teachers, and that pressure gets transferred to students. As the accountability features of the No Child Left Behind Act are implemented, what is the effect on students and professionals at the local school level? What are their perceptions of the law? The author’s purpose was to obtain insights into the views of teachers and students on the No Child Left Behind Act, specifically with reference to the provisions for accountability for student achievement.

Method
Participants

Teachers and administrators in a small district in a rural northeast state were invited to respond to five interview questions in person or in writing. The district has only one school per level at grades K, 6-8, and 9-12 and two grade 1-5 schools. Total student enrollment in grades K-6 is approximately 100 per class, in grades 7-12 enrollment ranges from 135-175 due to additional students tutored from surrounding rural towns. Approximately 33% of students are eligible for free/reduced lunch. The staff and student body are 99% white (the population of the state is 97% white) and approximately 16% of students are identified with disabilities. Responses were invited from professionals during August via the district Email system, in anticipation of the public release of Adequate Yearly Progress data by the state’s Department of Education. Responses were received from 12 professionals and 3 others were invited to respond in order to have a balanced representation of teachers and administrators from special education and general education across the K-12 range. Responses were provided by 15 professionals; 5 special educators K-12, 5 classroom teachers K-12, and 5 administrators K-12. Respondents were all certified in their area of employment although two of the special educators were working under conditional certification while completing graduate programs in special education. Years of employment in their current district ranged from 7 to 13 years (mean= 10.6) for classroom teachers; it ranged from 0 to 18 years (mean=6.4) for special education teachers; and from 0 to 10 (mean=4) for administrators. All participants had additional years of experience in other districts, ranging from 2 to 19 (mean =13.6) for special educators, from 5 to 27 (mean =13.6) for classroom teachers; and from 21 to 35 years (mean =27) for administrators.

Two of five heterogeneously grouped seventh grade social studies classes who spent one class period on NCLB as a current event were randomly selected to share their responses (N=37). Students were encouraged to locate articles in the newspaper about the law at the time the adequate yearly progress (AYP) scores for the state were released. Links were provided in class to three articles which reported diverse perspectives on the law (Bell, 2004; Keisch, 2004; Peters, 2004) and a department of education web site (USDOE, 2004); some students located additional sources on their own. After a brief introduction, students were allowed time to read about the law and then to discuss and write answers to five questions.

Interview Questions

The questions for professionals and students were developed by the author in collaboration with one of the guest editors of this issue and the editor of the journal. Questions were framed to elicit both perceived advantages and disadvantages of the law from all respondents. The articles for building background knowledge for students were selected by the author and teachers. A script was developed for oral interviews which included the same introduction and prompts as appeared on the written form. Responses were recorded verbatim. Staff and student responses were analyzed separately, one question at a time. The author looked for patterns among responses and tallied the number of concordant responses when relevant. More often quotes were cited to more accurately convey respondents' perceptions and to illustrate the distinctions among them.

Results
Perceptions of Students

When asked about their general knowledge of No Child Left Behind, most students knew it involved testing and schools were ranked on the test scores. Only a few students knew that it required testing in every grade 3-8. A few students noted that No Child Left Behind was affecting students’ level of participation in testing and that “a small school can fail just because one student didn’t do well.” Another noted that “the
压力在测验给出时积聚起来，”这种看法在其他学生中也常被提及。一位学生曾经提到学生不应满足于他们所做的一切，因为教师可以教孩子们自己学习，但他们可能不会得到它。一些人总认为没有把握一些事情是无意义的。一对学生曾提到教师的意图：‘有时候老师不会做一切他们可以做以帮助学生学习。’然而，大约三分之一的学生具体强调了干扰的影响和判断的不合适，因为仅有一名学生可以控制。他们做了这样的评论：

“不，因为有些孩子不想学！”
“不，因为教师可以教孩子们学他们最好的，但孩子们可能不理解他们。”
“不，因为有些孩子不想做测验和测验。”
“是他们的错如果他们不注意。”
“老师可能是一个好质量的老师，但孩子们只是不关心他们学校工作或成绩。”

许多学生没有意识到年度的年年进步排名是合理的，因为的不同的个人需要的学生的。他们对学校是否合理对成绩的依据发表的反对意见包括：

“不，因为即使是[教师]教我们这么多学校的孩子们学他们不能说的英语。这是学校的责任。”
“不，如果一个学生病了就不应该做测验或学校的责任。”
“孩子们不应该学习，因为他们在相同的速率，所以他们不应该是学校的负责。”
“也许，因为一些孩子有学习障碍和没有老师可以帮助他们，所以是学校的责任。”
“不，因为有些孩子不这样做，因为不是他们得到的帮助他们需要，所以我认为他们应该由孩子们的测验成绩评分。”

**是否学生会更努力因为测验？** 刚超过一半的学生回应了“是的，学生会更努力因为测验。”但是，许多学生回答“是的”和“不”都提到了增加的压力，特别是对很多学生来说，“NCLB No Child Left Behind is putting more stress on students. It has a lot more tests than need to be taken.” 大多数学生同意学生的说法，“Everybody hates tests.” 然而，学生们有不同的观点，关于增加的压力对测验是否有助于改善结果。

“不，孩子们在测验的压力中，因为他们会得到测验和他们感到非常紧张，所以他们会崩溃。”
“是的，因为他们会把他们的时间和他们的日程表教他们。他们[学生们]想呆在学校[和成功]。”
“是的，因为规则会变严，如果他们不。”
“是的，但我不认为学生会更紧张，因为他们可能没有达到或不反映整个学校，不是你。”

少数学生在区分测验能力的测试要求和NCCLB No Child Left Behind and effort on their classroom assignments. 有些学生认为如果学生在测试也做得好，那么他们也付出了很大的努力。比如，学生指出，学生“很难在测验但是不在学校，我们不能得到他们在想”因为他们没有知识或技能。

另一个可能的转变是学校是否能保持在测验中的成绩，如果学校失败，则被判断为失败。一个学生指出“有一个优势是，如果他们失败了，父母有让他们去另一个，更好的学校的选项。然而，大约12%的学生没有在离开他们的家校里所得被认可。我学生会更努力，所以他们不会在创造性。另一个学生认识到国际上的数字，因为有大量学生在迁移中。这些学校是否失败然后其他学校会得到所有的学生和学生的学校都得到了。”

总的来看，学生似乎有一个清晰的愿景，即是否测验的目的是提高学生学习更努力。“有些会，有些不…不是每个学生都会为了做工作。他们也开始理解工作之间的关系，测验分数和测验学习。“测验将得到孩子们学习，但那不会意味着他们会学习。”

**是否应该改变法律？** 学生被按照法律的要求来评分，法律，目前的法律。他们认为这是个优势吗？我不能看到一个！它帮助一些学校需要帮助，但是一些不必要的工作对于老师和学生。然而，其他人看到了这个优势，他们认为“更好的教育”对于所有人。一个学生同意联邦政府的观点，即那好，孩子会更努力或者老师们会教的更好。

其他改进法律的建议，是“也许[每年]两年，或如果你没有一年并且尝试通过下一次的测验你可能不有一个很长的时间去学一个高效的工作”，和“帮助孩子们学习更多，而不是使用测试来停止他们不给他们新的材料和新的方式去教同样的事情。”
**Perceptions of Educators**

Educators were asked what they perceived the advantages of the No Child Left Behind to be as well the challenges and whether they would choose to retain, amend, or repeal the law. Common themes cited often included: desirable effects of accountability, concerns about fairness to students with disabilities, conflicts between state and federal requirements, and allocation of resources.

**What are the benefits of No Child Left Behind?**
Most respondents reported that accountability provisions have had the desired effect of prompting teachers to consider more seriously what they are teaching, how they are teaching, and what’s most important to teach. It has increased dialogue among teaching staff about different ways to reach students with different learning styles. “We are forced to look at the most important instructional needs and we are beginning to use the assessments we put our students through. This may be the most important outcome of all.” Another advantage cited was the change in expectations for all students, especially those with disabilities. “All students should be expected to learn and I think this is a wake up call to regular class teachers to let them know that they are responsible for the learning of all their kids.”

**Should changes be made in No Child Left Behind?**
Most educators favored amending or repealing the law; only a few favored repeal. Those who suggested repealing it were also those who did not see many advantages to the law as currently enacted. One high school teacher stated, “I would advise Congress to repeal the current law because 1) it doesn’t really show fair and true academic progress . . . , 2) it isn’t properly funded so there is a greater financial burden put on public schools, 3) the expectations of raising test scores is unrealistic considering teachers have very little control over the conditions of a child’s life . . . [besides] 100% improvement is not a possibility for anyone, much less a child with a disability.” Another elementary teacher said, “repeal the law and fund programs which really make a difference for students. Spending federal money on testing will not improve children’s tragic childhoods. Congress needs to address the many factors that weaken school achievement; including housing, nutrition and medical care. Also the government should encourage liaisons between schools and our public universities, museums, scientific labs and libraries instead of big business.”

However, most educators acknowledge advantages to the law and suggested amending it. The importance of standards and accountability were frequently mentioned as advantages, but with caveats as to serious flaws in the current methods of measurement and goals for achievement. “If we continue with states having high standards [being] penalized for those standards, we will either see a total revolt or standards lowered. If the feds change the way they assess school performance to make it more equitable, the movement may move us forward educationally.” The issue of conflicting state and federal priorities was mentioned frequently. Many perceived the state’s learning standards and related system of classroom-based, authentic, teacher administered performance assessments to conflict with the No Child Left Behind’s requirement that student progress be measured with standardized tests. Their comments indicated that the state standards set a high bar for conceptual development in content areas over the course of a grade span (i.e. gr. 5-8), whereas the federal law favors annual testing of minimum competency levels. Now they are forced to try to achieve both aims through the same set of tests. A middle level principal voiced a concern expressed by several others, “My greatest fear is that our state standards will be watered down; instead, let’s have some provisions for special needs kids to be held to reasonable standards, reach a higher bar than in the past, but not the same as regular ed.”

Teachers in special education who had to prepare personal alternative portfolios, for the 1% of students who are eligible for alternative assessments, questioned the purposefulness of the process. The Personal Alternative Portfolio is lengthy (one student’s assessment may be 100 pages or more long) and is based primarily on a student’s mastery of indicators drawn from the state standards for learning in content areas. Only the level of difficulty is altered. So as one teacher phrased it. “We’re scoring kids on the developmental benchmarks for 5 year [olds] when many [of our students are functioning at a developmental level of] 6 months or less.” Teachers see the effort to prepare an IEP as a duplication of effort.

Although the focus of this study was the accountability provisions of No Child Left Behind, concerns about the highly qualified provisions of the law were also expressed, particularly among special educators. “The requirements will be difficult in more rural settings as teachers have to drive more than an hour to take course work. Travel and coursework expectations add an entire extra day into my seven day week. It’s not always the content . . . that is important for-teachers to have increased success but rather the other pieces of the job that they are less prepared for—behavior management, time management, crisis intervention, collaboration, strategies to help students in all the academic areas.” A principal who has recently worked in several states also noted the inconsistencies in requirements for certification from state to state pointing out that No Child Left Behind only confounds the confusion by layering on yet another set of conflicting requirements. Another teacher noted that, “Teachers are expected to be experts in their field and I support the notion that they have refresher courses. [However,] this will impact the flexibility for teachers to switch to a different area of study and create problems for schools in more rural settings that need to be able to adjust teaching roles according to class numbers . . .”

Another concern raised was the added levels of bureaucracy and the paperwork burden imposed by the law. A district level educator said she is appalled at the time demands imposed on building level administrators
by the new accountability and teacher quality standards. “In my district, administrators are taking this in stride as they do each additional paperwork burden that’s handed down, but it infuriates me to see them devoting days digging for three year old demographic data, reviewing twenty year old transcripts with teachers, and filling out form after form when their talents and time could better be spent interacting with students and teachers about teaching and learning. There are better ways to improve school quality.” An elementary teacher expanded on this, “No Child Left Behind is a quagmire of rules and paperwork. The only benefactors are big businesses that sell No Child Left Behind approved reading programs, and companies that produce testing materials or have been hired to take over public schools.”

Limitations

The views presented in this article were not obtained from a randomly selected or nationally representative sample. While it is likely that many of the issues raised are of universal concern (i.e., fairness to students for whom English is a second language), others may differ significantly according to location and the context of testing in each state (i.e., whether high stakes testing is already well established in a state). In the state in which this study was conducted, a challenging benchmark year test has been given at grades 4, 8, and 11 for almost 20 years. However, previous to the No Child Left Behind accountability provisions, there were few, if any, direct consequences for students based on participation or performance on the test and for schools and staff, any direct/indirect consequences were locally determined.

It’s possible that the themes that were dominant in students’ responses (fairness to subgroups, student effort, and the possible consequence of changing schools) were influenced by the selection of articles and materials that were provided for background information. However, it is noteworthy that some of the same themes were identified by teachers and students.

Discussion

It’s hard to argue against accountability for student learning, and neither students nor educators in this study tried to defend such a position. However, professionals and students questioned some of the core premises underlying the many provisions for implementing accountability through the No Child Left Behind Act and questioned the fairness of some of the law’s intended and unintended consequences. Students’ beliefs about learning and test performance appear to conflict with the underlying assumption that all students can and will meet content standards, if teachers teach better. Do students’ perceptions of the abilities and motivation of their peers to learn and demonstrate their learning through tests reflect astute and obvious observations that adult politicians have chosen to ignore? Or do they reflect socialization in a system that does not expect enough of many students and thus perpetuates patterns of performance that reflect the biases of teachers, community members, and peers? These questions warrant further investigation. Students’ perceptions of their peers’ as well as their own learning abilities are factors to be dealt with in order to effect significant change in culturally entrenched attitudes toward achievement and schooling.

Although most educators cited raised expectations and a more thorough analysis of the impact of instruction on all students as an advantage of No Child Left Behind, either implicitly or explicitly they also recommended some differentiation of instruction and expected outcomes, particularly for students with disabilities. One special educator, known for her advocacy and success in teaching highly challenging students and helping them succeed in regular education, offered these similars. “Asking all students to be able to perform at the same standards is like expecting gourmet food at McDonald’s. We aren’t made of the same ingredients and life experiences. The classroom environment can facilitate learning but we can’t spin gold out of straw.”

It appears that the new accountability requirements are causing professionals to look more closely at what they are teaching and how they are teaching it. This is a crucial element in using assessment to further continuous improvement of any system, but as Newmann (1993) cautions, changes in practice or structure may not be sufficient to achieve success for all students without changes in “forms of commitment and competence,” (p. 6). These include the depth of authentic learning and understanding in content areas, caring learning communities, and new roles for teachers. Many professionals and some students expressed the hope that this more careful analysis of and reflection on test results would result in more innovative and diverse types of instruction that would better meet the needs of students who have not traditionally been successful in traditional educational settings. To realize such a goal would demand a more comprehensive approach to assessment of learning than what currently exists to satisfy No Child Left Behind (Jones, 2004).

Furthermore, many expressed a concern about the unintended consequences teachers and students face in the meantime, less freedom to take advantage of teachable moments and improvise, more students dropping out of a school system that expects all students to learn the same amount by the same point in time, and an exodus of those who can afford it to private schools. Implicit in many of these comments was an apprehension that the local culture of the school would be lost, that personalized, localized curriculum would no longer be valued. As one elementary teacher said, “No Child Left Behind has tainted all our local accomplishments and invoked a pessimistic attitude toward teachers and schools. Instead of talking with parents about what is actually happening in schools, teachers and administrators are interpreting and spinning test results... Tests do nothing to inspire students or develop young people’s innate curiosity.
about the world.” For special educators in rural schools, in particular, the greatest challenge is perceived to be finding time to balance the often apparently competing demands of existing initiatives such as curriculum of place, community involvement, and development of functional skills, with additional demands imposed by No Child Left Behind, such as more advanced content area instruction, preparation for standardized tests, and time consuming alternative assessment procedures.

References
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